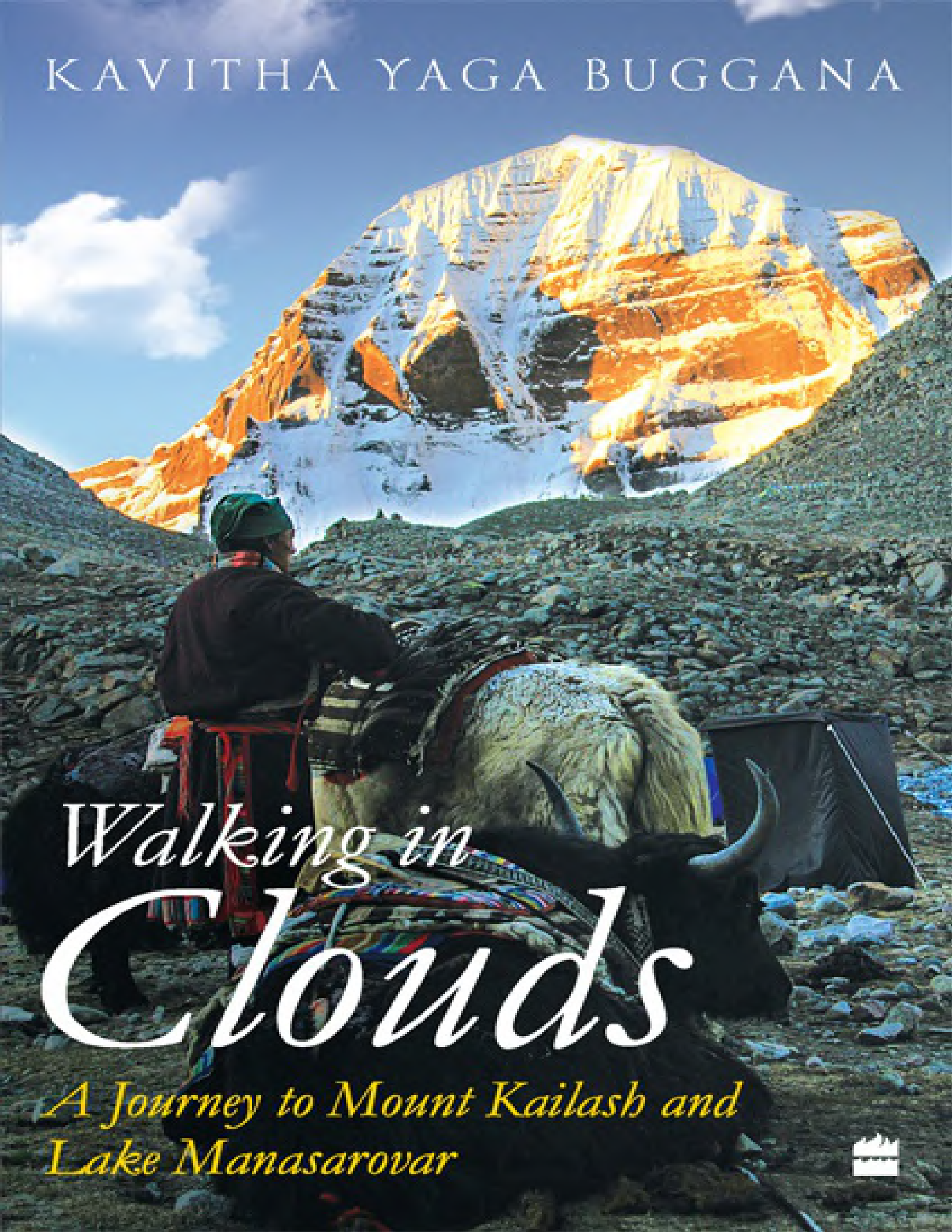
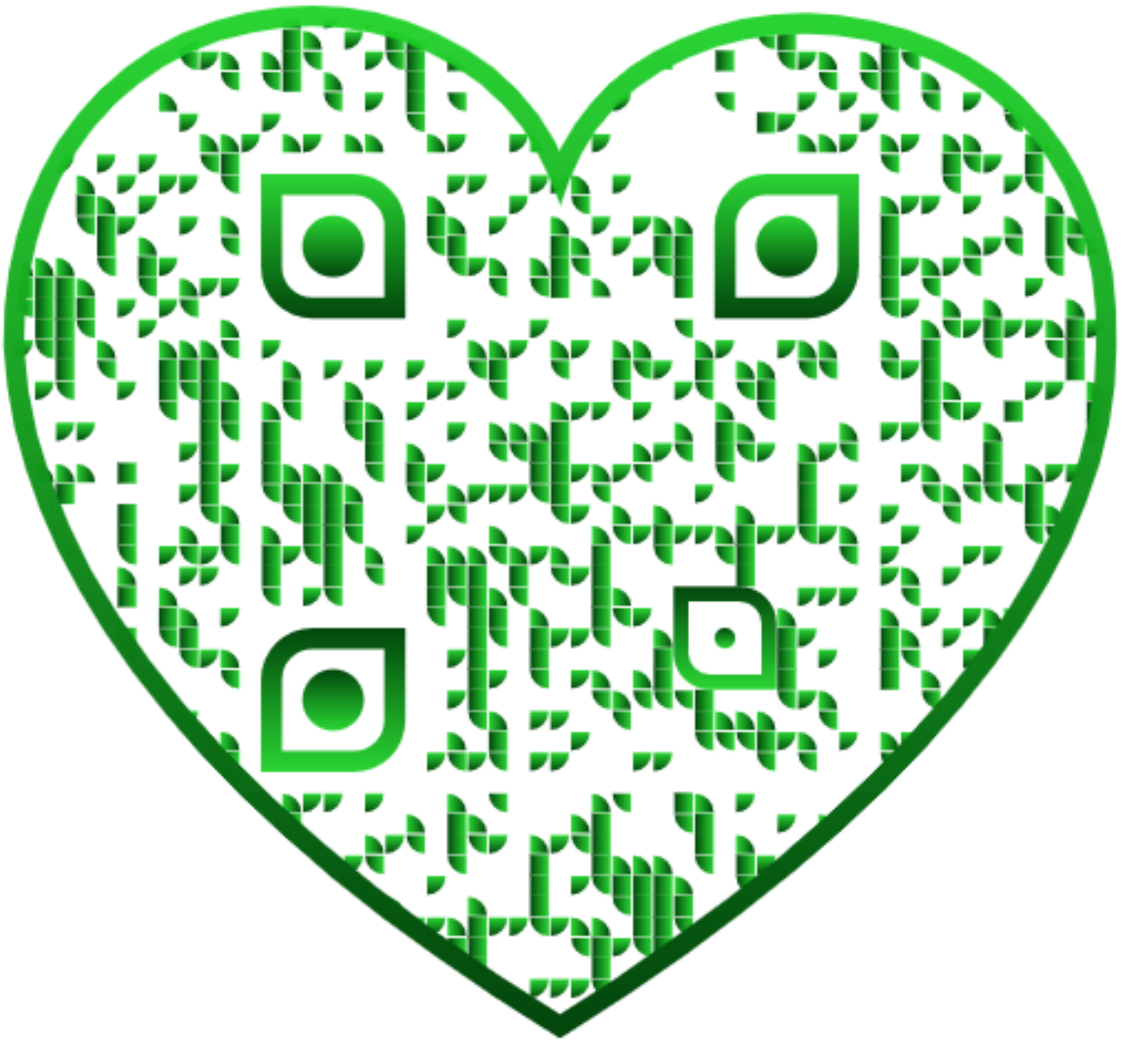
KAVITHA YAGA BUGGANA



Walking in Clouds

A Journey to Mount Kailash and Lake Manasarovar



Walking in Clouds

A Journey to Mount Kailash and Lake Manasarovar

KAVITHA YAGA BUGGANA

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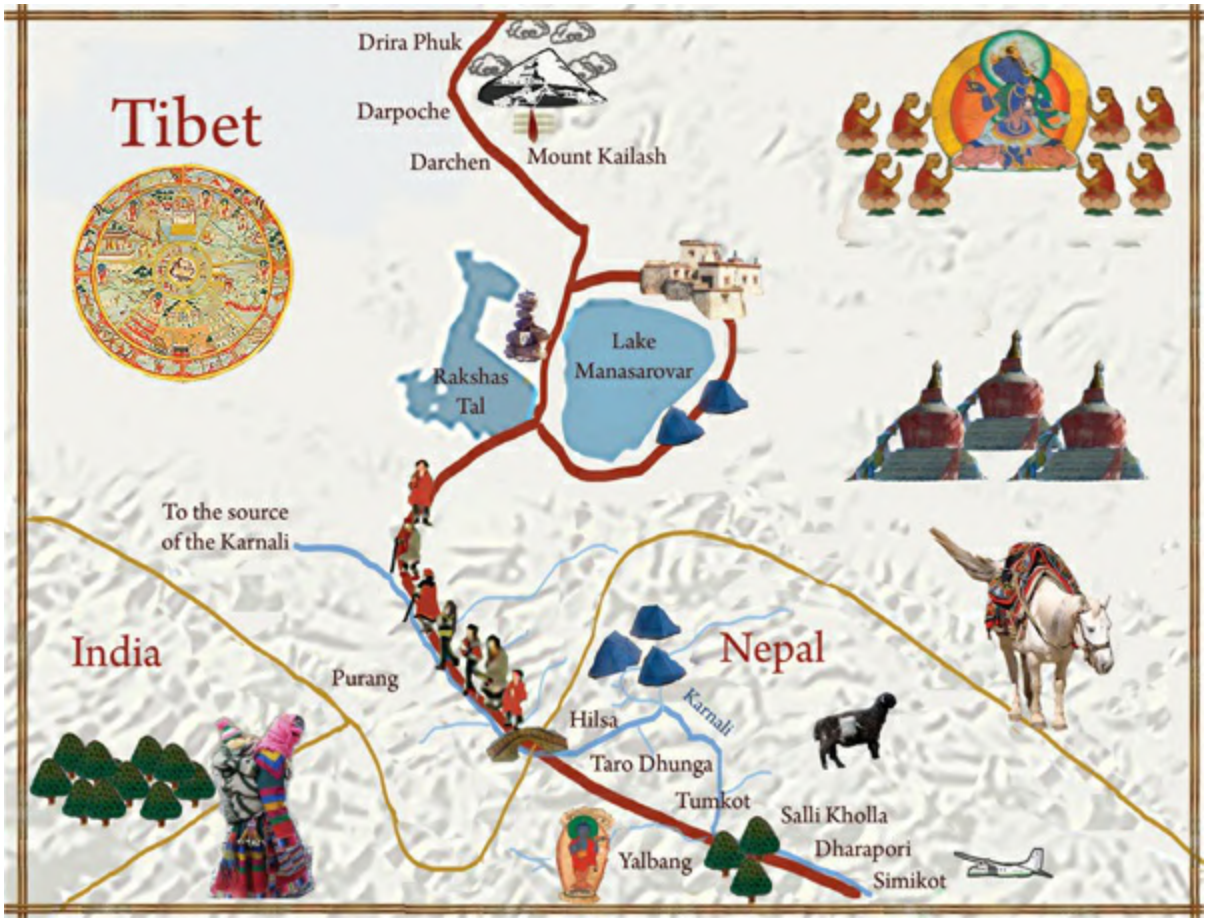
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The Lake and the Mountain

THERE ARE A LAKE and a mountain at the roof of the world where the air is thin and the clouds linger on cliffsides. These are places of wonder and the journey to see them will take many days. My cousin, Pallu, and I do not know if we will make it to these places or what drives us to go, but this is a journey we promised ourselves decades ago when we were still schoolgirls.

In those days we would climb the small, rounded hills that surrounded our school, nestled in a valley. It would take us an hour or two to reach the large rocks near the top. There, we stretched out on boulders as the clouds thinned slowly in the heat. We dreamed of adventures that seemed to lie waiting, just outside our sleepy world. And the greatest of all adventures was a journey to that lake and the mountain that were so far away – so beautiful that they seemed to belong more to the sky than to the earth.

Travellers, Waiting

Nepalgunj, Nepal
Altitude ~ 150 metres

ON THIS CLEAR MORNING in September, the sun shimmers and heat weaves itself into the dry earth. It's been four days since Pallu and I left our homes in Hyderabad, but our trek has not yet begun. Perched on a ledge outside the Nepalgunj airport building, my cousin and I wait with the others. Ying has, for the moment, put away her enormous black camera. She carries it everywhere despite her bad leg that drags. Sperello chats with Prarthana, Pallu's friend from home. Jeff, in his green Buddha T-shirt and wavy blonde hair, darts around the tiny airport lawn chasing a lizard. The scraggy grass and the leaves of the trees are lined with dust.

'So, do you think we will make it to Simikot today?' I ask Katy, who has found a shaded spot near the garden.

As an icebreaker, it will have to do. Pallu, Prarthana, and I had travelled together from Hyderabad, but we met the others only last night at Kathmandu airport.

'I think so,' Katy says. Her smile is quick, but warms her face all the way to her eyes.

'I hear there's a group that's been stranded here for two days, waiting to get to Simikot,' Pallu adds.

Everyone at this airport is waiting to fly to the tiny mountain town of Simikot. The length of our wait depends on Simikot's unreliable weather. Simikot is the starting point of the trek through Humla in northwest Nepal. The Humla trek

forms the first leg of our journey to Mount Kailash and Lake Manasarovar in Tibet.

Katy is a Hong Kong Chinese who moved to Vancouver years ago. She tells us she leads a busy life. A trained nurse, she is a hospital administrator and an avid trekker, with a grown-up daughter whose life is even busier than hers.

'How old are your kids?' Katy asks.

'My daughter is fourteen and my son is eight,' Pallu replies.

'Enjoy them. The best time is when they are little,' Katy says, her voice wistful.

'My boys are fourteen and eleven.' I picture my older son playing street cricket and my younger one sifting through a sea of Lego pieces, looking for the right one.

Memories of home on the morning of the journey well up: the garden, dark green with grass and dew, and its corner of pink oleander and red hibiscus; the children, their heads still droopy with sleep; Hari, my husband, quiet, as he sips coffee from his white porcelain cup. Though he tries not to show it, he is worried. He cannot understand why I am going to these places beyond the edges of our world. What drives me? How can I leave everyone for so long? What will happen to the family if something happens to me? These are fair questions. I am not sure I have the answers.

At Nepalgunj airport the sun grows stronger. Finally, our guide, Chhiring, a slightly built, wiry man in his twenties, shepherds us into the airport lounge. A Nepali serial plays on the television mounted on a wall. It reminds me of the Hindi television serials from the 1980s, screened by India's state-owned channel, Doordarshan. This is how all of Nepal feels to me. Its chaotic, honking cars veering around gigantic potholes, its demure women in bright saris and sindoor, the lingering innocence of its people call to mind the India of decades ago. After a while, the anachronistic novelty of the Nepali serial wears off and the tedium of waiting – the untold story of all travel – sets in.

I hear gasps and laughter. The airport security guard's two children squeal with delight as Jeff performs magic tricks. He makes grand gestures with his hands and brandishes a card in the air. The boy claps his hand over his lips. The girl's eyes widen and her shoulders scrunch in glee. Ying and Sperello take pictures. Pallu comes over to watch, and when the children laugh, we laugh with them.

After noon, when the winds in Simikot have turned heavy, Chhiring tells us it is unsafe to fly today. We head back to the hotel where Pallu, Prarthana, and I sink

into our air-conditioned rooms. The ebullient Prarthana is strangely quiet.

'How are the kids?' Pallu asks Prarthana. Their sons are classmates and their daughters are friends.

'They can watch too much TV, they can eat what they want – why won't they be fine?' Prarthana says.

Pallu laughs.

'We will be gone a long time, but they will be fine,' Prarthana adds, but I can see that she is less certain than she sounds. While Pallu and I have planned this journey for decades, Prarthana signed up just before registrations closed. Perhaps the implications of this long journey to the remotest of lands and the many days of being away from her family are only now dawning on her.

In the meantime, the foreigners (we call them that, though we all are foreigners in Nepal; they call us 'The Indian Ladies') are undismayed. They set out with cameras and sunhats to go sightseeing in rickshaws. They take pictures of old switchboards with bulbous switches and wires jutting out, fruit vendors, old rickshaws, dirty chicken stores, and stray donkeys. In our Indian towns, these sights are the embarrassing details of the grimy and run-down country we are trying to outgrow. But in their eyes, the falling-apart switchboard is a marvel of ingenious work-arounds; the fruit shop, with its piles of bright red, earthy brown, and bold yellow fruits, arranged in colour-coded geometry, an artist's delight.

In the evening, we gather at the hotel's restaurant. The rectangular structure with over-lit interiors is, I learn, an Indian restaurant. I don't know why I am surprised since the Indian border is only a few minutes' drive away, but my heart sinks. Most small Indian restaurants serve over-spiced, oil-drenched, clichéd imitations of the real thing. I say nothing, as the foreigners seem excited. I don't tell them that there is no such thing as 'Indian food'. There is no such thing as 'Telugu food', even, or 'Tamil food'. Each district has its microcosm of culinary traditions that use local ingredients for preparations, and they depend on the seasons, temperatures, and principles of Ayurveda. Therefore, even narrow geographic areas encompass a dizzying diversity of cuisine. My mother's village, for example, is famed for its tangy, spicy tamarind curries eaten with rice, while in my father's village they make steaming hot balls of ragi millets. In my husband's village, a meal without pappu (zesty vegetable dals) and soft jonna rotis is not a meal at all. And these villages are

all within a few hours' drive of each other. In this over-bright restaurant in Nepalgunj, I run a sceptical eye over the ersatz 'Indian food' on the menu.

Everyone else enthusiastically places their orders: mutton maharani, butter naan. Jeff, Sperello, Katy, and Ying have spent time together before we met them, and already have an easy camaraderie. Pallu, Prarthana, and I are more reserved. Before we started out, the three of us had wondered about our fellow travellers – Sperello, in particular. Would he turn out to be a hedonistic playboy with a distinctive fashion sense? Perhaps he would be a hot-tempered male full of machismo and unrestrained hand gestures? But he has proved to be far removed from any of these stereotypes. An astrophysicist from Florence, Sperello is punctilious in his grooming, careful with his words, and formal in his demeanour. The waiter appears with a tray of drinks.

'Cheers!' Jeff says, and takes a swig of his beer.

The waiter is still pouring the drinks. With a smile and raised eyebrows, Sperello points to the waiter and tells Jeff, who is cheerfully sipping his beer, 'In Italy, we know to wait till everyone is served.'

'Right,' Jeff says, nodding. 'In Australia, we know it too. We just don't give a shit.'

Everyone laughs.

Soon, the food arrives. It looks like standard Indian restaurant food, but, happily, I am completely wrong. The mutton maharani is redolent with rich, subtle and finely balanced flavours. The dal is perfectly spiced. The naans are hot and buttery. Everyone serves themselves seconds. We order more mutton, more naan.

'Watch this!' Jeff says. He picks up a spoon and, using it as a lever and his hand as a piston, pops off the cap of a beer bottle. Everyone claps. Jeff is obviously a man of unusual talents.

I hand him a bottle. 'Jeff, can you teach me? I want to show off this trick at home.'

I practise opening other people's beer bottles. Before long, caps fly off with quick flicks of my wrist. My husband and kids will be impressed.

After the plates have been cleared, Sperello opens his laptop and shows us pictures of his biking trip along the Silk Route. The journey from Italy to China looks spectacular. Temple grottos nestle in Chinese mountains, and Central Asian steppes of endless beige end in lakes of endless blue. Each carefully composed shot

is accompanied by a small story.

Pallu leans over and says softly, 'So different from the people back home.'

In our upper-middle-class bubble in Hyderabad, life is a set course of education, marriage, children, money to maintain a certain standing in society, and then retirement. But not for Sperello, Jeff, and Katy. They have their day jobs, but they also have their other lives, spent biking across continents, hiking in the green mountains of British Columbia, climbing the ancient ruins of Machu Picchu.

'Wait, wait!' I say, grabbing my notebook from my backpack. 'What was the name of the Chinese cave temple, again?' I take copious notes, though I am not sure why. Maybe I don't want to forget a single thing because some day I, too, will bike across continents.

I lean over to Pallu and say, 'I think we have found the right people for our trip, no?'

We are stuck in this town, not knowing if or when we will ever fly out, yet the beer is flowing and our laughter rings in the night.

Amid Giants

Simikot, Humla, Nepal
Altitude ~ 3,000 metres

THE ELEVEN-SEATER AIRCRAFT FROM Nepalgunj is the smallest one in which I have ever flown. A Chinese talisman with red tassels dangles on the cockpit window and it bobs and shimmies as the plane wobbles in the wind. While commercial airlines cruise at around 38,000 feet, we are at around 13,000 feet – the lowest altitude at which I have ever flown. As far as I can see, mountains and more mountains rise like giant frozen waves of earth. We glide over a green slope; I see small houses in clusters of twos and threes, and lonely single structures scattered here and there. The houses lie on acres of ledges cordoned into rectangular fields, and on terraced fields carved into slopes. Aside from these clusters, there is nothing – not a single house nor a single soul.

The people in these villages are tribal farmers. They work these difficult lands, tend livestock (primarily yaks and goats), and trade in forest produce and herbs in the plains below. It is a hard existence of isolation, without electricity or modern amenities. I try to imagine my children growing up here, and I cannot.

A sudden gust of wind makes the plane shudder. It flies suspended, its engine shaking against the force of the wind and the pull of these immense mountains. I hold my breath – it's a long way down. Small planes cushion you in false comfort with their steel and their loud engines. But when they are darting around mountains, what are they but inconsequential little things that can be flung against

the face of a jagged rock, like an eye-fly that you could flick with your index finger, if you were so inclined?

A few days ago, as we waited for our flight in Kathmandu airport, Chhiring had told us about a Buddha Air plane that had recently crashed on the way out. 'All the passengers died,' he had added.

'Were they all going to Kailash-Manasarovar?' Pallu asked.

'Yes. And they were all Indian pilgrims.'

To the more than 1.5 billion followers of the Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, and Bon faiths, Mount Kailash and Lake Manasarovar are amongst the most sacred of sites. To Hindu pilgrims, Kailash is the abode of Shiva – the God of Destruction – and Manasarovar is a holy lake created for Shiva's worship. A dip in Manasarovar cleanses all sins. To walk in Kailash is to walk in the heavens.

'Every year some Indian pilgrims die on Kailash,' Chhiring told us that day.

'Really? What do they die of?' I asked.

'Some die before they get to Kailash. Others die on the mountain because they fall sick and refuse to turn back.'

'Why do they refuse?' I persisted.

'They would rather die than turn back. They are happy to die on the mountain, with Shiva.' Chhiring shook his head. 'Can't understand, can't understand.'

Neither could I. The desire to die for a god is particularly baffling to me, an atheist. When Chhiring told us about the pilgrims I wanted to go back in time, grab those pilgrims by the shoulders and shake them till their teeth rattled. What good was their devotion? They had died anyway. Was it worth it? I wanted to ask them, was god worth dying for?

As I looked up at the sky over Kathmandu Airport, I thought of the crashed Buddha Air plane. I envisioned the debris of the shattered aircraft and, all around it, the familiar, everyday things of the pilgrims: masala peanuts, family photographs, a woman's dupatta. I pictured them scattered across the ground like lost dreams.

Our little plane to Simikot has regained control. The engine hums evenly and the plane continues its flight in a confident course. Below, the mountains are spaced further apart. The wind is gentler. The plane curves gently around a slope.

The valleys are narrow and shadowed, and rivers and streams etch their paths through the rocks. The clouds – some of them wispy tails, some, white cotton –

touch the rocks and waterfalls and trees on mountain slopes. These places seem unreal, almost magical. I put my hand against the window glass. Soon I will be walking in them and the clouds will touch me too.

We begin our descent. Tin-topped and red-roofed buildings appear on a mountain. This is Simikot, we are told. Where is the airport? I spy something that looks like an airstrip, but it cannot be much more than half a kilometre long. It appears dangerously close to the edge of the mountain. If we overshoot, we will end up hundreds of metres below, in the meandering river I had just been admiring. At one side of the airstrip lies the broken debris of a small plane, its tail pointing up. I press my nose to the window. This can't be where we are landing. Where is the airport building? Where is the runway? There must be some mistake. I press my nose harder against the window.

As the plane descends, its engines begin to groan. The pilot turns to Jeff, who's sitting directly behind him.

'Don't worry,' the pilot says, with a reassuring grin. 'Nobody die. Nobody die.'

A small shake, a few bumps, and the plane grinds to a halt on the runway. Later, I learn that when there are no planes landing, the airstrip is used as a playground and cricket field. Inside the plane, the red Chinese talisman is still. We snap open our seatbelts and grab our backpacks. The pilot was right. Nobody died.

People rush on to the airstrip and a crowd watches from behind a barbed-wire fence. Nestled between mountain peaks and pine forests, Simikot could be a picture on a postcard. This town of about two thousand people has a school, a small hospital, a few shops lining a dirt road, and an army camp nearby. Roads to the town are still being built. Though tinier than the smallest town I have visited in India, it is one of the biggest towns in Humla, and the headquarters of the Humla region.

Porters grab our bags. Shopkeepers and old women eye us curiously as we walk through the town. Chhiring is from the area, and his aunts and cousins greet him with big smiles and a pat on the shoulders. We meet the crew of workers. A small bespectacled man – a teacher in a village school – will be the assistant-guide. A lanky young cook examines the cooking vessels. Three sturdy men, who are to be our workers and assistants, tend to the mules that will carry our tents and portable chairs and tables. A few dogs sniff around us, and the children eye us with curiosity,

giggling.

After a light lunch of rice, chicken and omelettes, we begin our trek. Over the next six days we will follow the path of the Karnali and its tributaries, until we reach the Tibet border. This will end the first leg of our trek. Then we will drive to Lake Manasarovar and Mount Kailash, where we start the second leg of our trek – three days and two nights hiking around the towering Kailash.

Pallu and I are ready. Our backpacks are stuffed with things we have never used before: trekking poles, metal-tipped boots and emergency whistles. The cloth bandages are not meant for small scrapes and cuts but for 'real' wounds. Today's route will first be uphill and then mostly downhill. I feel I could run all the way but Pallu walks slowly, and as I walk with her, I can hardly believe we are finally here, on our way to the lake and the mountain.

When Pallu and I first dreamed of this journey we were studying in a boarding school in rural South India. We were certain we would make it in a few years, when we both turned eighteen. But over the next two decades life shepherded us along different paths. We each got married and moved away – I to Chicago and Pallu to New Jersey. We started careers and families. Eventually, however, we both moved back to India in order to be closer to our parents. We now live within three kilometres of each other.

This year Pallu turned forty and I turned forty-one. Our family responsibilities made us realise that if we were ever going to make this trip we would have to make it happen this year. One morning, we sat down in front of the computer in Pallu's house, took some deep breaths, and typed into the search engine the words 'trek to Manasarovar Kailash'. We found that there were several paths we could take. But none could match Humla. With its verdant slopes, mesmerising heights, and pristine beauty, it seemed untouched by time and unspoiled by the world. It was what we had always imagined our trek to be. We decided that this would be the year when we would finally set out for our journey, and Humla would be the route we would take.

On the way up, we pass little children squealing excitedly as they bathe at a flowing water pipe. A woman with beaded jewellery watches us. She is swathed in a length of voluminous white cloth with an infant's curious face popping out from inside it. The mountains and the air and the clouds beckon and I cannot wait to be

in their midst. I walk faster.

I look back at my cousin stepping slowly up the path. Should I wait for her? This is our trip, we have planned it together for years. But Katy, Jeff and Sperello are up ahead, and I cannot resist the thrill of being among the first group. I wave at Pallu.

She waves back. 'Keep going, Kavi!'

'Isn't this great?' I holler. Below me, shadows of clouds float on green mountaintops. I see the roofs of small stone houses with their tiny gardens and neat lines of orange mountain flowers. From up here, the grey landing strip looks like someone's large driveway.

The path is steep and surprisingly busy. A man and a woman lead two mountain horses, laden with carpets and rugs of brilliant colours: red, turquoise, orange, and black. Women herd donkeys carrying large plastic bags of what appear to be onions. A child aged four or five leads his donkeys down the path while a man guides his horses up. Two girls carry freshly cut wooden logs tied to their backs and their smiles are half curious, half shy.

I keep pace with Jeff, Katy and Sperello, who are ahead of everyone. My steps are as sure as theirs, fast and effortless. At the edge of the cliff, I stand on a rock overlooking the deep valley. The sky is a soft shade of blue, and a lone bird glides before me. The air is clear and cool, and the sun is bright yet gentle. It is the perfect day, the perfect time, and the perfect setting for the start of our trek.

Reality Hits

To Dharapori, Humla, Nepal

AT FIRST MY LEGS feel shaky. They tremble, as if from nerves. Simikot is not far behind, and up ahead, Katy, Jeff, and Sperello disappear along a curve.

Soon, it's not just my legs but my hips and arms that feel the strain. I sit on a boulder under a tree. All I need is to rest, just for a moment.

I shake my head to dispel my concerns. I am sure it is nothing. Why would I have any problems? I am a natural trekker. I sip some water and reflect on all the trekking I have done. There were the treks in the old boarding school that Pallu and I had attended. Of course, that was decades ago, and the hills there were gentle mounds. More recently, I have gone on treks with my younger son, near our home. But these were a kid-friendly hour or two. I sip more water, careful not to drink too much as I have hours to go. Fine. I may not have trekked much, but trekking is my *thing*.

I put away my water – it is time to set out. I spring off the boulder, convinced that my legs feel better. I am focused. I know that if I step up my pace I can still catch up with Katy and the others. But after a few minutes, my breath becomes laboured and my legs begin to feel shaky again. It is no use. I must stop. I take a long, deep breath and plant my feet on the path. I pretend I am simply soaking in the scenery, in case anyone from our group sees me and wonders why I have stopped. But why am I pretending? For whom? I am alone.

It strikes me suddenly – I am alone in the mountains. I have no idea where I am or where I should go, and I have only a few snacks and not much water on me. I

scramble down the path – I need to catch up with the others. My shoe slides on the dry sand and loose gravel on the path. I stop. Reality hits me. Katy and the others are too far ahead and there is no way I will catch up with them. I should go back. I turn around and start to climb back to Pallu and the others. But walking uphill is difficult and I do not want to get tired; there are many hours left in the trek. I go to the nearest rock and sit down.

Part of me becomes aware of the beauty that surrounds me. Before me, infinite stretches of slopes stand dramatically against a gentle blue sky. Yet, I cannot feel any sense of wonder. I look around. How can I remain unmoved? What is the point of the journey if I cannot immerse myself in every moment, every breath, every step of it? *Calm down*, I tell myself. I inhale, deep and slow. I force myself to stay aware, although I know that awareness, like a sliver of moonlight, cannot be forced to stay anywhere. I snap my eyes open and stand up. It is time to face facts. My mind is far from calm; I am alone in the mountains; and, clearly, trekking is not my thing.

Slowly, then. I will walk slowly until Pallu and the others catch up with me.

I pick up my backpack. It is brand new, as are my boots, my trekking poles, my trekking pants, my smart wool mountaineering socks, and almost everything I have with me. I bought them a few months ago, on a trip to America. In the outdoor gear shop the customer service guy, Dan, spent almost two hours helping me pick out everything. Dan had adjusted one backpack after the other. He made me try on French boots, German boots, American boots. He made me run, walk and jump in the boots till I found a pair that felt just right.

What a spectacle I must have made, jumping in the store in my boots. I spent hours selecting the perfect, most expensive equipment, so I would have no problems in my trek. Now, it turns out the biggest problem is my body.

I see Pallu and Prarthana, trudging slowly down the curved path. The two friends wave at me with their trekking poles. I wait for them to catch up. They don't ask me what happened, and I don't tell them. Soon the three of us are walking together, our poles grating as we dig them into the sandy path. Following closely behind are Ying and Chhiring. Ying's face is grim and her bad leg drags heavily.

Villagers pass by, herding their goats. A few children overtake us and their mothers follow behind. The sun is getting rosy and fat. The waters of the Karnali rumble below us. These are the magical places I had seen from the airplane window.

I know everything must look exquisite in the fading light, but I am aware only of how bone-tired I am. With each step, I think about where to put my foot and how to keep my balance. My muscles plead with me to stop. Every now and then, I have to pause, catch my breath, and swallow my panic.

Darkness descends on the mountain. Chhiring turns on his flashlight and I rummage through my backpack for mine. For this trip I had bought two flashlights from the outdoor store. The small square light attached to an elastic band is to be worn around the head so the hands can be kept free. The other is a slim light that also has an ear-piercing whistle for emergencies. But as my hand hunts for them in my backpack, I realise I have forgotten to pack them both. They are likely ensconced in my duffel, and carried safely to the campsite by the yaks.

'Pallu, do you have your flashlight?' I ask.

'No! I guess I left mine in the duffel bag.'

Prarthana? Ying? But the other women have also forgotten theirs. We all have to depend on Chhiring's flashlight. He walks back and forth illuminating the way for us. We descend the slope slowly, trying to stay close for safety and light.

'When we reach, the first thing I'm going to do is pack the flashlight in my day bag!' Pallu says.

When we reach or if we reach? I ask myself.

Minutes later, Chhiring's flashlight blinks. He shakes it, muttering about the battery. He slaps his palm on the glass, but it's no use; the light dies. We have no choice now – we begin descending in moonlight. In the distance, camp-lights glow dimly. What a long, long way down to the camp!

As our eyes begin to grow more accustomed to the dark, we become a little more sure-footed. We walk in silence.

If we just keep at it, we might make it, I think.

Just then, a drop of water falls on my cheek.

'It can't be!' Prarthana says, as she looks up at the sky. Seconds later, rain patters down.

'Oh, man!' Pallu shakes her head. Ying and I groan.

Chhiring tells us to just keep walking.

No one stops to bring out raincoats. The ground grows slippery in the rain. I hear a small animal scurrying across our path. A mountain rat? A snake? I shiver and

wish I could walk faster. With only the moon and the stars to light our way through the muddy path and rain, I am intensely aware of the darkness all around, the precipitous slopes, and the roar of the river raging through the mountains.

Other Journeys

THIS IS OUR THIRD attempt at making this journey. The first failed when everyone in our group dropped out before we even left Hyderabad. The second was aborted due to a combination of politics, history and unfortunate timing. We made it as far as Kathmandu, where our guide, a friendly, diminutive man called Sonam, introduced us to our fellow travellers: two courteous Austrian men, a pretty Swedish woman, and a serious, stocky Indian doctor from the Fiji Islands who had been planning the trip for years. One evening, over hot tea, Sonam broke the news that the Chinese authorities had cancelled all permits to Tibet.

That year marked the 60th anniversary of the signing of the Seventeen Point Agreement for the Peaceful Liberation of Tibet. The signing had taken place in 1951, a year after Chinese troops had invaded Tibet. For the Chinese, this was a liberation, but for the Tibetans, it was an occupation. The signatories included Tibetan delegates and the central government of the People's Republic of China. But the Tibetans disputed the legality of the agreement, claiming it had been signed under duress by unauthorised delegates. As the agreement was an important means to justify China's authority over Tibet, it was a highly charged issue. Political tensions were running high, and the 60th anniversary coincided with the festival of Saga Dawa.

We were to spend Saga Dawa in Darpoche, a sacred place at the foothills of Mount Kailash. Celebrated on the full moon day of the fourth Tibetan lunar month, Saga Dawa commemorates the birth, enlightenment and death of the Buddha

Shakyamuni, and is one of the holiest days in Tibetan Buddhism. Saga Dawa celebrations in Darpoche in Kailash are famous. There are festivities, chanting, lines of praying monks and bustling crowds from all over Tibet – crowds too large to control and monitor. In this uncertain situation, the Chinese authorities would not let in any foreign visitors. I knew there were likely scores of people like us waiting in Kathmandu.

When we heard the news, everyone was in shock. Sonam told us we had several options: we could cancel our trip, choose a different destination in Nepal, or we could go to Kailash via another route. But going to Kailash meant the tour company would keep our passports in Kathmandu to reapply for new permits with the amended dates. There was no guarantee that these permits would be granted, and for those few weeks we would be travelling through Nepal without passports.

We discussed other options. There was the kingdom of Mustang and the beautiful Annapurana circuit. But the doctor from the Fiji Islands finally spoke up. He had come to see the lake and the mountain and he was not ready to give up. The others felt the same way. But Pallu and I were unwilling to risk travelling without passports or permits. It was decided that the others would take their chances, and my cousin and I would head home. As I sipped my tea, I felt sorry for Pallu and myself, and unreasonably cross with the others for opting to go ahead without us.

The following day, Pallu and I boarded the flight back to India. We thought Manas – the nickname we had given to both the trip and the lake – was finally and forever behind us. Woven in with our disappointment, however, was a sense of relief.

A few weeks later, at the beginning of August, the travel company phoned Pallu. Another group was going to Kailash and Manasarovar via Humla. It was extremely short notice, and registrations were closing, but were we interested? We immediately signed up.

In our Telugu culture, elders believe a journey to a holy place can happen only if the traveller is called by the divine. Without that call, no amount of desire, effort or luck can suffice. As we packed our bags again, Pallu and I were hopeful. This time, the journey had called us.

First Camp

Dharapori, Humla, Nepal
Altitude ~ 2,300 metres

THE DHARAPORI CAMPSITE IS nestled in a valley at the banks of the river Karnali. After the rocky mountain path, it feels odd when my shoes sink into the soft, grassy ground at the riverbank. I hear the sound of the Karnali river nearby, but in the darkness I cannot see the water. The rain has stopped. The tents are blue triangles silhouetted against the sky dusted lightly with stars. Pallu and I drop into folding chairs in the dinner tent. Ying attempts a smile, but it is strained. Someone offers us each a plate of food and we eat without enthusiasm. Prarthana stares ahead, dazed. Jeff, Katy and Sperello are solicitous, having arrived hours earlier.

'Drink this,' Sperello says, and places a cup of something in front of Prarthana. 'It will make you feel better.' Prarthana is a spirited, statuesque woman with strong features. The fact that she feels weak seems discordant with her physical persona. Yet she has a streak of vulnerability, which she keeps well hidden, though Sperello has already sensed it.

I slump in my seat and take a deep breath. No one had told us. No one had told us that when you walk for hours and hours, your body becomes a thing you carry. Your bones drag you down, your muscles are a series of stretching and contracting aches. Your body becomes present, overwhelming, leaving space for nothing else – not the beauty of the place, not the comfort of companionship, nor the thrill of journey.

In the deep darkness everything looks hostile and eerie – the still silhouettes of the mules, the shape of a large dog sprawled on the ground, with its watchful glowing eyes, even the river sounds unfriendly, its rumbling a muttered threat.

I cannot continue this trek. What was I thinking? From the start, Hari had been uncomfortable with my decision. Had he known how unprepared I was? Had he guessed how hard it would be? When we signed up for this journey, I had not a single moment of nervousness or doubt. My confidence had prevented me from taking the journey seriously enough. But now I am struck by how far from fit Pallu and I are. We are overweight. We are short of breath after two flights of stairs. I am in my early forties and already suffer from hypertension. And yet, in our minds, we were adventurers who could scale the mountains of Tibet without breaking a sweat.

'I don't think we can do this, Pallu,' I say, as we walk to our tent.

'No way we can make it!' she adds, shaking her head. 'Let's go back to Simikot. We can fly back on the next plane that lands there.'

We head to the crew tents to break the news to Chhiring. I begin singing to myself, we're going home! I imagine falling on my bed and I can almost feel the warm, soft blankets wrapped around me.

Pallu stops and says, 'But there's one problem.'

'What?'

'That means tomorrow we have to walk back up all the way.'

I imagine the hours of gruelling uphill trekking and the aching muscles. My heart sinks.

'We'll never make it up there. It's impossible!'

There is only one thing to do.

When we find Chhiring, we demand that he gets us airlifted back to safety.

'Call Emergency Services,' we tell him.

Since cell phones don't get a signal in these remote reaches of Humla, we ask him to use the satellite phone.

With a little shrug Chhiring says the satellite phone is not working.

'How can the emergency satellite phone not be working? It's for emergencies,' I say.

'What if something happens?' Pallu asks.

'Nothing will happen,' Chhiring replies, a quick smile stretching the skin across

his large cheekbones. His unruffled cheerfulness, once reassuring, now seems sinister.

'What if something does happen? What if there is an emergency?' Pallu persists.

'Phone does not work here. Later, it will work. Let us see tomorrow,' he says, before hurrying off to speak to the cook.

We go to our tent.

'Tomorrow we will call the helicopter,' I tell Pallu, as I crawl into my sleeping bag.

'How did we ever think we could do this?' she says.

One More Day

To Salli Khola, Humla, Nepal

THIS IS THE THING about mornings – the sun changes everything. The dog, so sinister last night, now appears friendly and hovers for scraps. The mules look smaller and they chew leisurely on their feed. The river roars with life. Karnali is the longest river in Nepal and starts in the Lake Manasarovar area and eventually merges with the River Ganga in India. Sometimes emerald, sometimes turquoise, it sparkles like a diamond. Chhiring's crew bustles about, setting up breakfast and piling things on the mules. A delicate, pretty girl leans over the balcony of a house near the campsite. We tease Jeff and Sperello as they snap pictures of her. Even the breakfast of porridge and jam tastes good. The aches and fears of the night before have been washed away.

Pallu and I do not mention the satellite phone again. Had it really stopped working? Maybe. Or perhaps Chhiring has seen trekkers like us before and he knew we needed only to see the light of a new day.

Camping nearby is a German couple. Mariene and Stephen are also travelling to Kailash and Manasarovar. Their camp is at the edge of ours and their path will follow ours. Stephen's features are soft; Mariene's are sharper. They seem happy simply to be in each other's company. We learn that they breed dogs on their ranch on a hill in the German countryside. They tell us they love dogs and that their house is overrun with animals. Coming from the bustle of my hometown in India, where our days are overrun with family dinners, weddings, and social functions, their life

in a sprawling ranch on a distant hill with only animals for company seems at once serene and lonely. The two of them head out with their cook and their assistant.

We begin to troop up the slopes of Humla. We pass small settlements where children in bright, frayed clothes rush towards us asking excitedly for a 'Pen!' 'Pen!' 'Pen!' People here are wiry, with weathered skin. Some smile at us, others peer warily from their tiny, hay-topped houses of mud and stone. Little dogs, chickens and toddlers wander precariously along the rooftops and stare down at us. Their houses, their lives seem impossibly fragile against the raging mountain winds.

A couple of stocky young men wave at us. 'India? India?' they ask.

'Yes, India!' I wave back.

'Where in India?' they ask in Hindi.

'Hyderabad,' I say. They will not know of it. Hyderabad is not the first or even the fifth city that comes to mind when people think of India.

Their smiles widen. 'I know Hyderabad! You know Telugu?'

I stare at them, not knowing what to say.

They ask in Telugu, 'What is your name?'

I am too surprised to reply. How would someone in this most remote of places, hundreds of miles from my home, know my language?

They laugh at my surprise. They tell me they had worked as Gurkhas in the Telugu port-city of Visakhapatnam. Gurkhas, who were Nepalese soldiers, had so impressed the British Raj with their bravery and skill that they had their own regiment in the Indian army: the famous Gurkha Rifles. Nepali men are still associated with the fierce Gurkha soldiers and are often employed as security guards. In India, I have seen countless uniformed Gurkhas quietly guarding shopping malls or sitting listlessly on stools in front of houses.

They walk with me a while, then with a wave walk jauntily away – young men at home in the mountains. Back in India, these two men of Humla were perhaps like all the other Gurkhas – silent, subservient, almost invisible. Here, they are men of the mountains, strolling down the slopes, laughing, as sure of themselves as can be.

We cross a narrow steel bridge over the Karnali to ascend the slopes on the other side. We walk past swaths of mountainside covered with green grass and rows of pine trees. I splash my face with the chilled water from the steep waterfalls that cascade like veils.

Our path becomes a narrow tunnel carved into the edge of a cliff, one side opening up to a dizzying drop. Even a small skid would send me careening down to a certain death. I walk as close to the cliff-side as possible, making sure not to look down. As Pallu and I emerge from this jagged path, Jeff says, 'Smile!' He takes photos of each of us – *click, click*. Jeff is the sprightliest member of the group. He darts back and forth, taking photographs, resting on rocks, soaking his feet in small streams. This journey is as effortless for him as it is arduous for us.

Pallu and I had fielded plenty of advice on how to prepare for the journey. The pilgrims had said we needed only to believe in Shiva. The travel agency told us we should be physically fit and should train in preparation, while adding that the altitude makes all the difference and that no amount of training could prepare us for that. A friend advised us to take medication – a diuretic, although he conceded that it would provide no guarantee against altitude sickness. Someone said yoga was the best training for all things. I popped in my yoga DVD and contorted myself into various asanas. Then, after asking myself how these contortions would help me in the mountains, I popped out the DVD. Someone else suggested pranayama to increase lung capacity. Energetic puffing and slow breathing ensued in the two weeks before the trek.

Most people advised walking. A few days a week, Pallu, Prarthana and I took brisk walks at the local KBR Park. On other days, I would walk by myself. Occasionally, my boys joined me. The kids and I invented names for the places along our path. A long fence with overgrown creepers of orange flowers was the Fanta-Cola Wall. A lake where peacocks danced in the monsoon season was the African Serengeti. A boulder with a large cactus plant spiking out the top was The Giant Upside-Down Pineapple. There was an elevated clearing with a lookout point, a favourite for clandestine lovers and birding enthusiasts. Further along was a small water body. These we called Mount Kailash and Lake Manasarovar.

We have stopped for lunch at a clearing near Kermi village. I take off my trekking shoes and press my feet. The lunch site faces green slopes and blue skies. The sun is warm on my cheeks. Everyone is delighted with the fresh, hot food.

'I hope all our lunches are like this,' Pallu says.

My cousin has made this journey easy for herself. In the mountains, we deal with the experience of walking in our own ways. Pallu is unperturbed by her ambling

pace; her every step is careful. How has she reached this acceptance of herself and of her expectations of the journey?

I realise that while I know her, I don't really know her. When I see her walking in front of me, she is not just as she is. She is the young girl she was when I knew her first; she is the woman she is now; and she is everything in-between.

Pallu's parents lived in a small town, and for her final two years of high school, she moved to Hyderabad. For those two years, she lived with my family. I felt like I'd found myself a full-time sister. We giggled late into the night, raided the fridge for midnight feasts, and conducted spooky sessions on the Ouija board. We visited local haunted houses and explored old buildings. We went to parties, plays, and college fairs.

At the end of the whirlwind two years, Pallu was to move to Chennai for college. The afternoon she was to leave, we both lounged in our room. Half-packed suitcases lay open on the bed. She had the left side of the wardrobe and I had the right, but how were we now to separate everything? She had bought a pretty top in Bangalore, but I was the one who wore it. I had a record, but she was the one who listened to it. Who would get what? The finality and uncertainty of those gaping suitcases made me wonder what life had in store for us. There had to be some way to hold on to the times we shared.

'What about Manas?' I asked.

Pallu's face brightened. 'Yes! Manas. We have to do it.'

We began jotting down a list of things for our trek.

'Boots,' I said.

'Yes,' she said, 'and gloves.' I nodded, making the straight hair that always half-covered my face bounce.

Woollen coats, medicines, socks. And safety pins. That tiny detail – safety pins – imbued the list and the journey with seriousness and purpose. I kept the list in a drawer in my closet where I kept some other secret things: trinkets, letters from Hari (though I did not know then that I would marry him a few years later), photographs, a diary. Over the passing years, I lost that list. When I finally got down to packing for Manas, I used a new list sent by the travel agents. It did not mention safety pins, but I threw some in anyway.

Readers

To Salli Khola, Humla, Nepal

THE MOUNTAINS APPEAR TO have been painted with an artist's wild abandon. Along the slopes are terraced fields of red barley and yellow mustard, outlined with dark green hedges. The fields are like overlapping half-ringed designs on an embroidered skirt. In a distant field, barley has been cut and arranged in piles on a large sheet. A man sits on one end of the sheet while a woman and child, perhaps his wife and daughter, sit on the other side. The girl looks up. While I cannot see her face, I feel the curiosity behind her gaze. We pass a herd of mountain goats grazing in the sun, and a yak tugging at some plants near a tree. Further ahead, a spot has been marked with stones, while two poles bear ropes of prayer flags dancing in the wind – indications of a sacred space. Clouds form meandering, diffused lines against a powder blue sky, and in the distance merge into grey, enveloping rain.

As I ascend the steep slope I am surprised to see Sperello. His camera swings on his shoulder and the walking stick digs into the earth. His gait is uncharacteristically slow. He tells me his left heel has been aching since Kathmandu.

'You must be worried!' I say.

'Yes,' he shrugs, giving his walking pole a little shake. 'This helps a lot.'

Flavia, his sister, suffers from the same pain and can no longer go on her beloved walks. He regards his ache as Flavia's ache. The thought that he is carrying his sister's pain makes it easier for Sperello to bear his own. He hopes that by bringing their shared pain to Kailash, it will pass.

Anna, his other sister, has slipped a black ribbon bearing an invisible message into a white envelope and asked him to leave it under a stone in Kailash. As a keepsake she wants a pebble from the mountain. His friend wants salt from these places that are famous for it, and Carla, his wife, has asked for a shawl. Sperello says his journey is full of expectations.

'Why this mountain?' I ask him. 'In India everyone knows about Kailash because it is the place of Shiva, but how did you and your family hear of it in Italy?'

He says he was inspired by a book about Mount Kailash. I love reading too, I tell him.

I don't tell him that I used to be a greedy reader. I always had a book lying in my car. I would pick it up every time I stopped the car at a red light, even if for a minute or two. Then the light would turn green and the cars behind me would start honking. Another book was for the bathroom, and a third for my bedside table. I would read in gulps, all the while thinking about the next one on my list.

One day I was sitting upstairs in my balcony, sipping hot chai and reading a book. It was a winter day, chilly bright, as winter days often are in Hyderabad. As I read a passage in which a woman sips tea in her garden, I could taste her tea and it tasted better than my chai. I felt the breeze on her skin, and I delighted in the dappled beauty of her garden. How vivid her life seemed! All her sensations, thoughts and emotions seemed so immediate, while mine felt dull and ordinary.

I put the book down. I sipped the chai and closed my eyes, savouring its hot, milky sweetness on my tongue. I walked to the balcony and looked down at my own garden. The giant, old trees formed a canopy, the cactus flowers grew around large boulders, and the bougainvillea looked like translucent pink paper petals in the sun. The beauty of my world escaped me, while the beauty of the world in the pages of a book felt more real, more beautiful, more alive than my own. I was living a second-hand life.

For a while, I stopped reading. When I started again, I treated each book with respect, mindful of the fact that someone had spent hours writing it, tormenting themselves over verbs and unruly sentences. Someone had put themselves out on paper, open to ridicule. Someone had shown more courage than me. Each book became a sip of fine wine that I savoured without rushing. Now, every time I start a book, I want to experience it fully, while keeping in mind that the lived experience is

always greater than the story being read.

When Pallu and I were planning this journey, I wanted to read everything ever written on Humla and Kailash. I wanted to see every photo ever taken. I wanted to bring along a book on the lake and the mountain and read it during my journey. But then I decided not to do any of those things. I wanted to witness this journey with new eyes. I wanted to feel how cold the cold was, without already having read about it. The blue of the sky, the ripples on water, the dewdrops on grass: I wanted to see them first myself.

We reach a height and curve around to the other side of the mountain. The path slopes downhill but I doubt that will be any easier on Sperello's foot.

Pallu, Lake Manasarovar, second camp. *Photo by Katy*

Kavitha, near Simikot airport. *Photo by Pallu*

Prarthana on the way to Salli Kholla. *Photo by Sperello*

Ying at Rakshas Tal, with Mount Kailash as the backdrop. *Photo by Jeff*

Jeff at Rakshas Tal, with Mount Kailash as the backdrop. *Photo by Jeff*

Katy trekking up the slopes near Simikot. *Photo by Sperello*

Katy stops to chat with two women near Simikot. *Photo by Ying*

Camera-ready Sperello. *Photo by Ying*

Chhiring and the crew at Rakshas Tal. *Photo by Ying*

A smiling girl, near Simikot. *Photo by Ying*

Young monks turning the wheel of Dhamma at Yalbang Monastery. *Photo by Jeff*

Ying at Nepalgunj Airport, looking for the perfect shot. *Photo by Kavitha*

Entrance to Yalbang Monastery. *Photo by Sperello*

Flying from Nepalgunj to Simikot. *Photo by Sperello*

A child in a mountain village between Salli Kholla and Tumkot. *Photo by Sperello*

Along the ancient Salt Route: Yalbang Chaur Meadow. *Photo by Sperello*

The Karnali flows around the mountains between Salli Kholla and Tumkot. *Photo by Ying*

Salt caravans at the Tumkot campsite. *Photo by Jeff*

The monks' quarters at Yalbang Monastery. *Photo by Ying*

Children greet us at a mountain village on the way to Tumkot. *Photo by Sperello*

Jeff shows off his magic tricks to young monks at Yalbang Monastery. *Photo by Sperello*

A curious monk at Yalbang Monastery. *Photo by Ying*

Little monks take a break, Yalbang Monastery. *Photo by Jeff*

A mountain village on the way to Tumkot. *Photo by Jeff*

Vistas near Tumkot. *Photo by Ying*

Three chortens between Yalbang and Tumkot. *Photo by Sperello*

A girl does her homework in a village on the way to Tharo Dhunga. *Photo by Sperello*

Villagers making hay on rooftops. *Photo by Sperello*

Our campsite at Tharo Dhunga. *Photo by Ying*

Locals crossing a bridge at Hilsa. *Photo by Ying*

Yak horns as offerings on the way to Rakshas Tal. *Photo by Ying*

On the way to Hilsa. *Photo by Sperello*

The first sighting of Mount Kailash. *Photo by Ying*

A cairn to friendship at Rakshas Tal. *Photo by Pallu*

Kavitha meditating at Rakshas Tal. *Photo by Katy*

Mount Kailash as seen from Chiu Gompa Monastery. *Photo by Sperello*

A traveller on the way to Mount Kailash. *Photo by Jeff*

'I haven't read any books by Italians,' I tell him. 'Can you recommend any? But they would have to be in translation.'

'Good Italian writers. Hmmm, there are so many. But translations, I am not sure,' Sperello says. His steps slow down as he thinks.

Finally, he asks, 'Have you read *Baron in the Trees*?'

'No. What is it about?'

'It is about a baron who decides to live in trees. It's about his life.'

'Sounds intriguing,' I say. It sounds quite bizarre and I cannot wait to read it. I am impressed by the originality of his recommendation.

'Yes, it's very good.' Sperello nods. 'It is famous.' He digs his trekking pole into the ground. 'Have you heard of Dante?'

'You mean, the *Divine Comedy* Dante?'

'Yes.'

'Of course!'

Sperello smiles. 'He is my ancestor.'

I stop and stare. 'Dante Alighieri is your ancestor?'

'Yes.'

'Wow!'

I wonder if Sperello knows that the original manuscript of the *Divine Comedy* is in the Asiatic Society in Mumbai. The manuscript had been gifted to the society by Mountstuart Elphinstone, the British Governor of Bombay, in the early nineteenth century. In Mumbai I often passed the Asiatic Society and thought of Dante and the old manuscript that had travelled across the world from Italy to India. I smile at Sperello. Everyone in the world is connected in unexpected ways.

Along the Karnali

Salli Khola, Humla, Nepal
Altitude ~ 2,800 metres

I HAVE BEEN AT it for hours. Step, step, dig poles in, step, step. Over the past hour the path seems to have become drier and more gravelly. It is almost evening and Pallu and I should have reached the campsite by now. I imagine Sperello, Katy, and Jeff relaxing over a cup of tea at the campsite. Through the clearing I can see the river. This is a branch of the Karnali, the Salli Khola, and it looks grey and churns white foam. I can hear its roar. Behind it, half hidden by a clump of trees, is our campsite. It does not look too far away, but at my pace it could take an hour or two to reach it.

A tribal woman, a member of our crew, pulls her horse behind her. As Pallu and I navigate the slippery path, the woman grows impatient. She says something, nods, and offers us her hands. Pallu and I each hold one of her hands. She begins to walk briskly, taking us with her, her grip reassuring and firm. Before we know it, we have descended a distance that would have surely taken us three times longer. Perhaps the key to the easy descent lay in the woman's hands. They gave us confidence and set us free from having to wonder where to place our next steps. When we reach the banks of the river, it is still daylight.

With a nod, the woman lets go of our hands and tugs at the reins of her horse. Pallu and I cross the bridge to the campsite at Salli Khola, where Chhiring's crew has already set up the tents. I drop into a chair. A plate of biscuits has been laid out. Hot tea steams in aluminium mugs.

‘This is just what I need,’ Pallu says. She lays down her hat and takes a sip of sweet tea.

In the early evening sun, the water of the river is dappled with the light and shadow of leaves. I cup my hands around my mug, close my eyes and inhale deeply, eviscerated of the energy to do anything else. If I could summon the will, I would sit on the banks of the river, somewhere away from everyone, and watch the ins and outs of my breath, and feel the breeze on my skin. At home, I meditate every day. But on this journey, whenever I sit down for a session, my thoughts dart madly like insects, and my body shifts restlessly. After a point, I give up.

Jeff tells us Mariene, the German woman we’d met at the previous campsite, had been sitting on the banks of the river, meditating. Wasn’t that strange and a little eccentric, he adds. I want to tell Jeff that that is exactly what I have been thinking of doing, and maybe it is eccentric and strange, and what was wrong with that? But he is gone.

I think again of setting out for a walk to the river bank but the memory of long hours of walking still lingers in my bones, pinning me to my seat. I want to crawl into my tent. How will I trek tomorrow?

Pallu and I could have opted for an easier way. We could have been driven in Land Cruisers like many Indian pilgrims. None of the Indian travellers we know have taken the Humla route; they have all gone through Nyalam. But what is the point of being driven in boxy vehicles through busy Nyalam, with its built-up roads and small lodges, when we can walk through the pristine, breathtaking Humla with other trekkers from all over the world?

This journey means something different to each of us. To Pallu and me, it means adventure and beauty. To the pilgrims, the adventure, the beauty, the journey itself, is a walk in the shadows of the gods.

For decades, this dream was an impossible one for most Indians. The Kailash area was closed to pilgrims and visitors 1962 onwards. The ban reflected the worsening relations between India and China. In 1959, the Chinese government protested the sanctuary India had given to the Fourteenth Dalai Lama after he fled across the border following a violent uprising in Lhasa in which thousands were killed. Then, beginning in 1962, India and China engaged in a series of military engagements over disputed territories in which India was defeated. As tensions

began to ease, the Kailash area was re-opened in 1980, just after the start of the Chinese economic reforms. But permits were granted only to a limited number of pre-screened visitors under constant supervision.

The re-opening of the pilgrimage route was met with a frenzy of excitement. The first batch of Indian pilgrims left in 1981, with the whole country giving them a grand send-off. Good wishes poured in from all parts and newspaper and television coverage reached its heights. Indian villages en route received them with signboards reading '*Swagath*' (welcome).

It was not an easy journey. Arrangements were uncertain and the path was dangerous. At all times, the visiting pilgrims were escorted by officials from both the Chinese and Indian governments.

The first expedition was led by Deb Mukharji, an officer in the elite Indian Foreign Service and a close friend of my father's. I learned of the journey to Kailash and Manasarovar from my father's accounts of Deb Mukharji's trip. Later, when Pallu heard of the trip, we began to dream of going there ourselves.

What a strange course of connect-the-dots it has been. Deb Mukharji's stories, and the excitement of that first trip, had sparked my imagination decades ago. If he had trekked the Hindu-Kush in Afghanistan or the Alps in Europe, would I have been walking those mountains instead?

At dinner, Jeff shows us a new trick. He puts his backpack on the ground with its straps facing up. He picks it up with one hand and swings it in an arc. With one swift movement, the straps are on his shoulders.

'Hey! Teach me,' I say.

With the bottle cap-opening trick and the backpack-flipping manoeuvre, I will be a hero to my boys. I wonder how they are doing. Are they finishing their homework on time? Are they eating well? I imagine them in their room, with their bird kites hung over the beds, and their posters of rock stars, race cars, and guitars. When they were much younger, I had stuck shining star stickers all over their room. At night, when I told them stories and tucked them in, all around us the stickers would glow white-green.

'Come here, ladies, and I will show you the stars!' Sperello tells us later that night.

He slips into astrophysicist mode, as he points out the constellations, recites

distances, and names planets and galaxies. While Pallu and the others slip away, I stay, my feet planted on the ground, my head lifted to the skies. In these heights, the heavens seem to have drifted down, almost touching the earth. The air is cold. The river hums, invisible over rocks. This is the most brilliant sky I have ever seen in my life. As I gaze at the heavens, I feel I am falling and flying, and I become intensely aware of these wondrous stars illuminating a great infinity.

As Long As It Takes

To Tumkot, Humla, Nepal
Altitude ~ 2,885 metres

THE MORNING SUN IS bright in the crisp air of vast open spaces. We are back at the banks of the Karnali, which has turned gentle in Yalbang Chaur Meadow. I cup my hands in the river's cool water.

'Yalbang Chaur was an ancient trading post, an important one on this route. People got their yaks and goods here to sell,' Chhiring says.

As if to prove his point, Yalbang Chaur suddenly fills up with a hundred goats and yaks – although they don't appear hairy enough to be yaks. I learn later that these are dzo, a cross-breed between yaks and cows. As men in brightly coloured coats herd the animals down the hills, I can imagine this place as it appeared centuries ago, resounding with the voices of traders exchanging news, bartering and haggling over livestock, grains, salt, and cloth.

One of Chhiring's assistants leads a mule past us. It is time to leave. The path up the meadow is lined with wild apricot trees. The trees are old, yet the small, pink-brown apricots hanging from them look like blushing orbs.

'Are the apricots safe to eat? Can I taste one?' I ask Chhiring.

'Here.' He plucks one for me.

The apricots are so sour, they make my lips pucker. Pallu chuckles at the expression on my face. I catch Chhiring hiding a smile.

We make our way down the narrow path where goats carry small saddle-bags of

mountain salt to the plains. Lines of goats such as these have been making this journey for centuries and are the salt caravans. The salt they carry comes from the salt lakes in the mountains of Tibet. These lakes are the remnants of the ancient Tethys Sea, displaced millions of years ago as the Indian plate shifted towards the Eurasian plate. Their geological collision formed Tibet. And it is not over – the lands we are walking on are, at every moment, inching infinitesimally upwards.

As we trek higher up the path, Pallu asks Chhiring how much longer till lunch break.

'Not too long,' Chhiring says. Again, the nod and the mysterious smile.

'Chhiring, the brochure your company sent us says the trek is only about five hours each day,' I remind him.

'Yes. Every day the walking is five hours,' he agrees.

'But the last few days,' I try to keep my voice even, 'we have been walking nine hours a day.'

'Yes. You are walking nine hours a day.'

'Is it five hours or nine?'

'For some people five hours. For you, nine hours.' Chhiring's face is inscrutable and I cannot tell if this is a statement of fact or a joke.

I turn to Pallu and say, 'In other words, it takes as long as it takes.'

We stop at a clearing in an alpine forest to have lunch. Pallu and I lay down our trekking poles.

'We have a treat,' Katy says, showing us her plate. 'Dumplings!'

The cook puts steaming white mounds of dough and meat on a round platter with a red towel.

'Chhiring, this is a feast!' I point to my plate.

'You like them?'

'Yes. They are as good as the ones I've had in restaurants.' I bite into the white rolls and steam gushes out. 'Better, actually.'

Prarthana inhales as she takes another helping of fresh dumplings. Sperello teases her about her nose. The two are already good friends.

Through a line of spindly pine trees, sunlight sparkles off the waters of Karnali, which flows along the edge of the campsite. The forest is a perfect green. This green of pine forests is not the dense, flamboyant green of tropical jungles; it is softer and

has space for air and patches of sky.

Walking up, we leave the Karnali behind us. The forest gives way to subdued palettes of grey and various shades of brown. The sun is warm and the air is cool, an intoxicating combination. A small stream of water flows down, forming a clear puddle before continuing along the slopes. I put down my trekking poles and crouch as I cup my hands in the icy water.

'Smile, Kavi!' Chhiring says.

When I look up, Chhiring takes a photograph with his cell phone. He has taken photos of us throughout the journey: Jeff with the children at Nepalgunj Airport, Ying climbing up rocks.

'Can you send me the photo?' I ask my guide.

'Yes. I will send everyone's photographs through Facebook.'

'You use Facebook?' I don't know why I am surprised, Chhiring is a young man in his twenties.

'Yes. Yes. I use Facebook,' he says.

Today Chhiring is chatty. We begin talking about Kathmandu, Tibet, his trip to India. He tells me he likes football and describes a game he has recently watched. He starts talking about politics in Nepal and, realising that most places in South Asia are united by corruption, we compare notes. Then he tells me he loves movies, particularly Bollywood. It strikes me that this is a strange conversation to have in Humla with a man who spends much of his time in the remotest of mountains, far from computers and electricity.

Deities

Tumkot, Humla, Nepal
Altitude ~ 3,100 metres

THE SLOPES HAVE GROWN steeper and the green has given way to brown dust and grey stone. In the midst of these subdued and monotone shades stands the gateway to the Yalbang monastery. The gateway's psychedelic red, yellow, and blue paintings, and gold carvings seem to explode against the starkness of the rocky surroundings.

As we enter, we see a flurry of little monks. Children with shaved heads and orange and brown robes are bursting with excitement at the visitors. They range in age from five years to fifteen. When Jeff whips out his pack of cards, the little monks mill around him, leaning over each other, eyes wide, necks craned. Jeff flips the cards, makes them disappear and reappear – the same magic trick I had seen at Nepalgunj Airport. The children gasp and cheer and laugh, their faces shining and beautiful. They remind me of my own boys. Monk and child, how much of each is in them?

A light-green thanka hangs at the entrance to the main shrine. Thankas are embroidered or painted cloths depicting the life and teachings of the Buddha and are hung outside homes or temples. The Yalbang thanka has a red and yellow wheel with scenes depicting Buddha's life and teachings. The wheel is enclosed in the body of a demon – perhaps Mara, the embodiment of death and attachment.

The two main paths in the Buddhist world are the Theravada path and the

Mahayana path. The Theravada path is practised in Sri Lanka, Burma, and other southern Asian countries. Based on the Pali canon of Buddha's teachings, Theravada is the stricter of the two and emphasises the goal of enlightenment and liberation from samsara or the material world. The Mahayana path is practiced in China, Japan, and other northern Asian countries. Based on the Pali cannon, it also draws from other Buddhist texts which are composed mainly in Sanskrit. Mahayana emphasises the attainment of the Bodhisattva state. Bodhisattvas are highly compassionate and spiritually evolved beings who delay their own enlightenment so they can help others. The Vajrayana path, a form of Mahayana that emphasises tantric practices, is prevalent in Tibet and the Himalayan region. The Yalbang monastery belongs to the Nyingma sect, which is the oldest sect of Vajrayana Buddhism.

Inside the Yalbang shrine is a dark hall with two symmetrical lines of large pillars. On an altar in front is a golden statue of a seated Buddha. Below the Buddha is a picture of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama and it is likely to be the last image of him we will see for many days. At the altar there is also a photograph of a round-faced man of indeterminate age. Chhiring points to it and says, 'This is Lama Pema Riksal. We pray mainly to Lama Pema Riksal and Guru Rinpoche.'

Said to be a reincarnation of an ancient Indian siddha or learned master, Lama Pema Riksal is the leader and spiritual head of Chhiring's community, a sub-sect within the Nyingma sect. The founder of the Nyingma school is Guru Rinpoche, who is also known as Padmasambhava. Padmasambhava means 'lotus born', as he was found as a young child floating in a lake (in what could now be modern-day Afghanistan). An 8th-century Buddhist master, he was trained in India, where his magical powers became legendary. He came to Tibet along with the first wave of Buddhist teachers, who included Santarakshita, the Abbot of the famed Nalanda University in present-day Bihar. Padmasambhava was summoned by King Trisong Duetsen to conquer the demons that were plaguing the people of Tibet. Until his death, Padmasambhava roamed the length of Tibet, teaching Buddhism.

At the right of the altar stands a statue depicting two deities, one male and one female, intertwined in sexual union. A thin white cloth covers their thighs, perhaps for modesty. The male deity is Buddha Demchok or Chakrasamvara, the Tibetan tantric deity who lives on Kailash. The female deity is Vajravarahi, his consort. He

sits straight, impassive; she is draped around him like a vine. He denotes compassion; she, insight. Their union is a symbolic one between the two qualities and bears a striking resemblance to depictions of Shiva and Parvathi. Shiva's common symbol of worship is the lingam (which some believe is Shiva's phallus while others believe it to be a shaft of light or a manifestation of his cosmic energy). Parvathi is depicted as a yoni (or a womb, both physical and spiritual). Their union is considered to be the source of creative energy.

'The temple doesn't look so old,' I tell Chhiring.

'The original monastery is very old. This one, not so old.' Chhiring's voice remains even, but his lips tighten.

The old Namkha Khyung Dzong Monastery in Tibet was destroyed by the Chinese in 1959 and was rebuilt here in Yalbang in the mid-1980s. Yet, this tragic past is not readily evident here. A sense of peace seems to pervade the Yalbang monastery, and the bright colours of the building's artwork, the excited chattering of monks, and the altar with its bright plastic flowers and smoky incense imbue the place with vibrancy.

It's deeply unsettling to picture the original temple being razed, monks fleeing with scrolls and images, fire and rubble consuming once-sacred grounds. But those scrolls and images were mere objects. The old temple was just a stone building. Why am I so unsettled by the destruction of objects and buildings? After all, I would not be as troubled by the breaking of some other thing, such as a pencil or a chair. Nor would I be as perturbed by the destruction of some other building, such as a shop or a movie theatre.

My dismay stems from something deeper. An object is often identified with an emotion or a meaning or a story or an idea of faith or beauty, which is its essence. To the builder of the temple, the sculptor of the image, the worshipper or the aesthete, the sacred object and its essence are inseparable and they are often repositories of important cultural identities. In the old temple, it was not stone or metal that was targeted, but the Tibetan people's sense of self, their spirit, culture, hopes, and strengths. The implied malice of the deliberate targeting of these qualities is unnerving in a way that unintentional destruction by natural forces is not. Even the atheist in me can sense the depth of loss that Chhiring and his people must feel.

Yet, there is irony in this too. Buddha taught that this essence is a form of maya – illusion which causes craving, attachment, and suffering. Buddha also emphasised the truth of the impermanence of all things. Presumably, this would include Buddhist temples and images.

Before I leave the temple, I gaze at the photograph of the Dalai Lama on the altar. His expression is one of serenity, innocence, and hope. This new temple is, I decide, a sign of hope. In graceful defiance of its desecrators, the old monastery has refused to die; it has only moved.

Although it feels like I have been walking for hours, the sun has not moved far across the sky. I feel tired, yet strangely aware. The air is crisp and everything feels perfectly clear, as if someone has taken a bar of soap and washed the earth and sky and retouched all the colours. I am aware of the freshness of the air, and acutely aware of my fatigue.

It's time for a small break. Prarthana, Pallu and I rest on a rock and dig into our bags for snacks. Pallu and Prarthana have brought a spicy, fried lentil mixture to share. I have brought some healthy fruit-and-nut bars, which no one seems to want to share.

Ying rounds the bend, digging her trekking poles into the ground and pushing herself forward.

'Ying!' Prarthana calls out. 'Come and take a break with us.'

'I can't sit,' she says, her face pale and set under her coloured bandana. 'If I sit down, even for a second, I won't get up. I can't stop.'

Chhiring had told us neither strength nor speed were the key to finishing the trek. 'Ninety per cent is in the mind. You have to be strong mentally.' By this metric, Ying is the most likely of us all to make it. We begin to walk with her. Through the rhythm of our steps, we hear the River Karnali.

Two Nepali guards are manning a small government outpost near our campsite. They check our permits, telling Chhiring there was an earthquake late this morning. 'An earthquake? Where?' we ask. It happened near a path we have taken, the one leading from the meadow to the monastery. We are told it was a small earthquake. Still, it is a wonder none of us felt anything.

Pallu says, 'Hopefully our husbands won't hear of the earthquake.'

I know what she means.

‘Think about it, Kavi. We just trekked through an earthquake,’ she adds.

‘We should add it to the list. Cancelled permits, earthquake – what next?’

‘Avalanche?’ Pallu says, as we head down the slopes.

‘Lightning?’

Storms, landslides, fires, snow leopards, snake bites – we make a list of potential natural calamities. When we reach Tumkot Camp, Pallu and I are laughing.

As we settle in the campsite, I feel uneasy in the dimming light. A few tents are scattered around the area. The campers appear to be nomads. Throughout our journey, the people we’ve encountered have greeted us with a friendly wave or with open curiosity. Some have seemed indifferent. But these people seem hostile, their eyes cold, their jaws set.

Chhiring notices my unease. ‘They have so little,’ he says. ‘They have hard life. Just be careful with your things. Don’t leave things lying around.’

As I hurry to my tent, a local man eyes me with animosity. Once inside, I zip up the flaps of my tent. I shrug off my backpack. It is stuffed with clothes, snacks, a camel water pack, a flashlight, hats, three pairs of gloves and medicines for every contingency. My large duffel bag, which has been carried by yaks, bursts at the seams with additional clothing and supplies. The possessions I have acquired for this short trek seem to far outnumber what the nomads have brought to sustain them for an entire year. Like Chhiring says, considering they have so little and face such hardship, their resentment for our over-stuffed lives should come as no surprise. While a traveller like me brings income to the locals, the material disparity between us is stark. I wonder whether our interactions will bring greater prosperity and understanding or greater friction and resentment.

Before we sleep, Pallu checks my blood pressure with my portable machine. The readings are higher than normal, but I’m not worried. My doctor said blood pressure levels do increase with altitude and this does not impact trekking.

‘Let me check yours,’ I tell Pallu. Her blood pressure levels are usually normal, so her readings will be my benchmark.

Her readings are higher than mine.

‘Really?’ she says.

‘But BP readings are higher as you go up.’ I zip the machine into my backpack.

‘Should I be worried?’ Pallu asks, as she gets into her sleeping bag.

‘I don’t think so. And since mine are lower, I guess I should not be worried, either.’

Within minutes, Pallu falls into a deep sleep. I toss and turn. There is something about this campsite I do not like, though I can’t put my finger on it. Maybe the presence of the nomads is making me anxious. Maybe I am unsettled by the mountains encircling us. Or maybe I am concerned about my blood pressure. Sleep refuses to come, and I know I’ll need it. Chhiring has told us that tomorrow’s leg will be the most challenging portion of the trek through Humla.

Crossing a Line

Tharo Dhunga, Humla, Nepal, Altitude ~ 4,000 metres

TIBETAN DOGS ARE THE biggest I have ever seen, with fur like a lion's mane. As Pallu and I walk uphill, two tawny-coloured canines walk down, staring at us with red eyes.

'Be careful,' Chhiring says. 'If you are alone, they attack. They eat humans.' The closer we get to the Kailash-Manasarovar area, the more frequently we hear this warning. The dogs here have tasted human flesh at sky burials, which are still practised in Tibet and in parts of India and Nepal.

A sky burial is a ceremony in which a corpse is cut into pieces and left on a raised, open-air platform, to be picked apart by vultures. More than just a ritual, it is an affirmation of the Buddhist values of temporality (the body is impermanent and after death is merely an empty vessel) and compassion (the flesh is offered to other living creatures as a final act of generosity). The ritual stems also from practicality; the terrain is rocky and trees are sparse, making burial and cremation difficult. But lately, the vultures are mysteriously dying out, and now dogs consume the corpse-flesh. It seems they have acquired a taste for it. Throughout the rest of our journey, we see dogs hovering at the edges of campsites.

A small group of yaks is being herded down. The large animals are too close for comfort, so Pallu and I press against the cliff-side as the yaks pass, their hooves crunching on the rocks. An enormous dog follows them. It casts a red-eyed glance

at us before continuing on its way.

'Those are some nasty-looking dogs,' I say.

'When they are puppies, they are cute,' Chhiring says.

He tells me he once took an orphaned Tibetan puppy back to Kathmandu. As the weather got warmer Chhiring tried to keep the puppy cool, but it began to suffer because of the intense heat. By the summer's end, the dog died.

'I never took any dog after that,' Chhiring says.

Every few minutes, Pallu and I rest. In this leg of the journey, today's climb will be the steepest. Chhiring has told us to go slow, slow. Walk a little, stop a little. The river below us is now another Karnali tributary, Bumachiya Khola. We have already climbed far above it and I can barely hear its roar. We take our time, but at the top of the ascent, I am struck by how little I have felt the strain. The sun is brilliant, and the air is crisply cold. I feel elated to have made it this far. Before us stands a big cairn of stones, topped with wisps of yellow, blue, and white prayer flags. Yak horns have been strewn across the rocks as auspicious offerings.

'You guys add some stones, too,' Prarthana says, as we approach her.

Ying has already added her rock to the cairn and is headed onward.

I find a smooth, flat rock near the slope. Cairns seem like something a child would build, like sand castles on a beach. But this one is a solemn thing. Its prayer flags and offerings are an expression of longing for something greater than the self. I want my act of adding to the cairn to have meaning too.

When I place the stone, I dedicate it to gratitude. Gratitude because we have made it so far. Gratitude at the ease of today's climb. Gratitude for the clear sky, and the mules carrying our things. Gratitude for all the people who have come here before me, those who will come after me, and those who will keep building this cairn with their own stones, bearing with them their own reasons for making this journey.

Pallu collects a couple of stones and places them on the cairn. Her hair is wind-tossed and she wears a big smile.

'Man, that was easier than I thought!' she says. Her voice sounds more confident than it has in some time.

This trip is important to Pallu. She is full of big ideas and grand plans that often remain unrealised. When friends and family members tease her about it, she laughs.

She does not mind the banter, yet a part of her wants to prove them wrong. Before embarking on this journey, Pallu made a wager with her brother. If she completed the journey, he would treat her to a homemade biryani dinner.

'You'd better make it tasty,' she had said, sassy as ever.

The ground levels out and we see a shrine, no bigger than a large dollhouse. In front of it is a frayed footprint in solid rock. Chhiring says it belonged to the Buddha, who was said to have walked these parts. Offerings and Mani rocks have been carefully placed around the footprint.

Mani rocks are stones carved with the Buddhist chant '*Om Mani Padme Hum'.*

In Mahayana Buddhism, these syllables encapsulate the essence of all the teachings of the Buddha. According to the Dalai Lama, *Om Mani Padme Hum* points to the 'dependence on the practice of a path which is an indivisible union of method and wisdom; you can transform your impure body, speech, and mind into the pure exalted body, speech, and mind of a Buddha'.

The Dalai Lama is the head of the Gelupa sect, the youngest of the sects in Tibet. The Dalai Lama is said to be the living reincarnation of the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshwara and a physical embodiment of compassion. Most people think that the Dalai Lama is the only spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhism; he is not. However, he is its most revered and beloved leader. His sect, the Gelupa, is the largest in Tibet and emphasises the importance of the monastic life on the path to enlightenment.

Each sect has its own religious head and emphasises a different practice. The Kagyu sect places greater emphasis on the life of the householder and the issues he or she faces in samsara. (The Karmapa Lama is the head of Kagyu's largest school.) The Sakya sect had started in Eastern Tibet and is led by a male heir of the Khön family. In a twist of irony, the Rime sect does not believe in sects.

All sects (including non-sects) follow Dhamma, the teachings of the Buddha, which emphasises the two qualities of compassion and enlightenment as being essential to the cessation of suffering. All teachers and leaders revere the Buddha, as not a god but an enlightened man of infinite compassion and wisdom.

I take a photograph of the footprint in the rock (though through my viewfinder it appears blurry and uninspiring). The locals walk by the footprint showing reverence, but without the apparent awe that one would expect to feel before an

actual footprint of the Buddha. In India, the discovery of a footprint of a major Hindu god would inspire the construction of an enormous temple. There would be priests, and people would clamour to get a darshan (viewing) of the sacred footprint. Here, the shrine of Buddha's footprint is so small and the offerings around it so few, I would have missed it if Chhiring had not pointed it out.

Two men are coming down the other side. Chhiring and the men converse in Nepalese, pointing to a spot further along our path. Chhiring looks worried. When they leave, he tells us there has been a landslide, so our way is blocked. We are to take a different, longer route.

I cannot see any residue of a landslide. The dust must already have settled. Looking up, I see that the soil seems to dangle precariously above us.

'Do you have many landslides?' I ask Chhiring.

'Landslides are more common. This area, lots of mining. The soil is getting loose.'

'What do they mine for?'

'Gold,' he says. 'People say there is gold here, in these mountains.'

'Is it true?' I ask.

'I don't know. But there is too much mining. It is bad for the mountains.'

We walk for some time in silence. Slowly, we ascend the slopes. I pick up a small, rounded stone that is slightly black and shiny. Could this be gold? Whatever it is, it belongs here in the mountains. I let it fall through my fingers.

'We're crossing the tree line.' Pallu points it out, as if it is a landmark.

When I peer down the slope, I see the stark division between trees and barren earth. It appears as if a child picked up a crayon and drew a dash against the mountains, and beyond it no green is allowed. In crossing this line, I feel I am entering a different world.

The rocks stretch across the bare earth as far as the eye can see. In the absence of trees, the mountains stand naked to wind and sun, dust and snow. Walking where trees cannot live, I feel unprotected, and strangely bereft.

Today's lunch site at Palbang is one of the most beautiful spots we've encountered so far. We find ourselves in a clearing at a cliff's edge. On one side are deep gorges of mountains, the upper slopes, swaths of earth-brown, the lower slopes flushed with the green of trees and bushes that grow like forgotten memories.

On the other side, spectacular cliffs rise to the skies as monoliths of mud and rock.

Our group sits in a circle, sipping hot, clear soup. Our jackets are off, the sun warming us. Within hours, the mountain air may turn bitterly cold. Apart from the first day in Simikot, we have seen no rain. I remember the group we had hoped to set out with on our second attempt at making this journey. They spent many days of their Humla trek travelling through incessant rain.

When they went on without us, there was no guarantee the group would get their Kailash permits. The guide had promised to take them, at the very least, to a point from where they might see Mount Kailash from afar. For days they trudged through rain and wet mud, borne on by the mere possibility of a glimpse of the mountain. In the end, their entry permits to Tibet and the Kailash area were approved. A jeep carried the permits to the border, where the travellers were waiting.

I can picture the jubilation the group must have felt as they crossed that border after the uncertainty of the journey and their unrelenting determination. I can imagine their feeling of triumph and vindication at the end. I wonder sometimes if Pallu and I had quit too easily. Our elders might have seen it differently. They would have said that the old group had been called for the other journey while this journey had called Pallu and me. In a way, it is this thought that carries me when my legs are aching and my back is sore and the campsite seems such a long, long way away.

After lunch, with waving hands and loud exhortations, Prarthana helps our assistant guide to flag down a rickety pick-up truck. Pallu and I climb in with her. Ying hesitates, and I share her ambivalence. We have almost completed the first leg of the trek, and walking all the way would provide a fuller sense of closure. But the comfortable seats are tempting and I am too tired to resist. Ying eventually gets in with us. We set off to Tharo Dhunga, where we will camp for the night.

Tharo Dhunga is a tiny settlement. The houses are set amongst mountain tops with spectacular sheer drops, slopes on which pine trees struggle in the thin air. The women are dressed in turquoise and red, with brilliant blue and gold jewellery. Their children stare at us with their beautiful eyes, their round cheeks pink under the coating of dust. They stand around their mothers' orbit without speaking to us, fixing us with interested gazes, neither curious nor shy. Unlike the children back

home – the children of the city – these children never seem bored.

The women serve us steaming cups of clear garlic soup. We are told it is good for altitudes. Prarthana cannot have the soup, because she feels queasy. She suddenly looks weak. Chhiring checks her pulse and face. He gives her some medicine, and continuously monitors her.

'Are you all right?' Sperello asks her.

She nods, but her expression betrays uncertainty. Chhiring tells us it is a mild attack of altitude sickness.

'Keep awake, so you can sleep tonight,' Sperello adds.

After dinner, Pallu visits Prarthana's tent. Not for the first time, I wonder whether Pallu feels tugged between me and her friend from home.

'She seems much better,' Pallu says when she gets back. 'She wants to rest.'

'Should you stay with her tonight?'

'No.' Pallu shakes her head. 'She says she'll be fine.'

'Good. What a relief! But who knew this could happen? I mean, I knew it *could* happen, but who knew it could happen to us?'

Before I left, Hari had asked me, 'Why would you go to these dangerous places?'

'This trek is about as dangerous as any trek in high altitudes,' I assured him. 'Every year hundreds of people complete it, including older people. There's nothing to worry about.'

'Every year, lots of people die in the mountains. There's plenty to worry about.'

'The people who die are mostly Indian pilgrims,' I had pointed out. 'They are unfit and ill-equipped. They are not us.'

'Like you, they thought they would make it.'

'We will be fine, Hari. Nothing will happen to us.'

In our tents that night, Pallu and I recite anecdotes, as if they are litanies.

'Have you heard,' one of us begins, 'about the yogi who went with a group of pilgrims to Kailash? The yogi was fit – he did Asana, Pranayama, meditation every day. Several times a day. He scoffed at the others, who could barely touch their toes. He boasted about his lung capacity, the strength of his endurance, his mental fitness. On the second and most difficult day of the Kailash trek, he raced ahead of the group. When they caught up with him, they found him doubled up on the rocky trail. Altitude sickness. Of this group, he was the only one who died.'

'Wait – this one is even scarier! At the campsite on the first day at Kailash, an Indian pilgrim, a woman in her thirties, woke up at night to use the toilet tent. She had altitude sickness, but she did not know it. In the morning, they found her in the toilet tent, dead.'

'Did I tell you the one about the dogs? A Japanese man was camping at Lake Manasarovar. It was off season, so there was hardly anyone around. The man went alone, without his guide, for a walk along the lake's edge. The guide heard distant screams. He rushed to the spot with the campsite caretakers. When they arrived, they found the man's body ripped apart by giant Tibetan dogs. Among his torn remains was his hand clutching his cell phone. He had been trying to dial for help.'

While these anecdotes make us shudder, saying them out loud distances them from reality. They become fairy tales in a children's book or our favourite horror movies that play out behind safe screens.

Soldiers

Purang, Tibet
Altitude ~ 4,000 metres

AT 4,600 METRES, THE Nara La pass is one of the highest points on our trek. Only the Dolma La pass of Kailash, at 5,500 metres, will be higher. I briefly toy with the idea of trekking through Nara La, but I decide against it. Having made the shift to a jeep I am now less motivated to trek all the way. Sperello and Jeff are set to start but Katy is less confident. She is not sure whether she will make it across, but she is determined to try. The three of them start early morning with Chhiring.

Ying, Prarthana, Pallu and I bundle into a jeep with the assistant guide. The atmosphere is festive. Loud Bollywood tunes blare from the sound system. Two people trek through a steep, gorged valley. I know immediately they are not locals. Tourists have more things attached to them. They are generally taller and broader than the locals. Their jackets are brighter, and they walk differently. They navigate the landscape with evident effort, while locals pass through it as if strolling along a backyard garden path. I realise that we must be as exotic to the locals as they are to us.

Throughout our journey we have been taking photographs of the locals. Some of them smile at us, some are indifferent, and a few turn away, annoyed. Most are puzzled – what is so exotic about their bright jewellery, or their herds of goats, or their dusty cheeks and bright eyes?

I remember at Nepalgunj Airport, in a corner of the garden had stood a man in a

grey business suit. On his head was a pink *topi*, a hat, and a chest piece made of long grasses, beads and gold coins. He was dressed for a special occasion; perhaps he was a bridegroom. *Click, click, click,* we began to take photos of him. His stance – hand in pocket, head turned to various flattering profiles – told us that he was aware of our photos, but his expression seemed somewhat puzzled: why were we so interested in him? It was an odd, ironic moment for both the photographer and the photographed. To the man, the neckpiece and topi were unremarkable old relics that his people had been wearing for generations; it was the modern suit that was photo-worthy. To us, the western suit was interesting only as a contrast to his startling neckpiece and topi. If I had dressed for an Indian wedding in a brightly coloured woven silk sari, a traditional gold necklace and a decorative bindi on my forehead, would tourists have taken photos of me? Would they eagerly post it to their friends on social media, with National Geographic-style comments: 'South Indian woman in traditional wedding attire'? I was momentarily disconcerted by the idea that I, too, could be 'exotic'.

We reach a small town called Hilsa located on a cliff on the banks of a river. This is the River Karnali, which diverged from our path near Tumkot and now, in Hilsa, we are reunited with it. But Karnali looks different here. It seems wider. Clothes and plastic lie dumped in piles at the bank. There is a large steel bridge. This is the bridge which connects Hilsa with Tibet. This is the last town we'll visit in Nepal before we cross the border. In Hilsa, we wait for Katy, Jeff, and Sperello to join us.

Walking along the narrow roads we pass a group of children playing near a hand water-pump. A wispy-haired child, no older than ten, carries a baby in a sling on his back. We stop at a small house with a large stove in the middle. A woman squats before it, prodding at the embers. We are in the family room that doubles up as a small café with long tables. At the back are rooms for the family. The woman at the stove offers us hot tea. Pallu, Prarthana, and I warm our hands around the steaming cups as we stretch our legs out beneath the wooden benches. Ying wants to shoot pictures of the town. She leaves with her camera cradled in the crook of her elbow.

Prarthana tells us her father-in-law recently passed away. Pallu knows the family well.

'I am going to go out for a bit,' I say. It is time to let the two friends talk freely.

'Where?' Pallu asks.

‘Sightseeing,’ I say.

They both laugh.

Outside, a woman is weaving a shawl from green, red, and white yak wool. It is a slow process, each step almost imperceptibly growing the shawl. I plan to shop for gifts on my way back to India. I resolve to not haggle over prices that seem paltry, considering the days of labour spent weaving each shawl. As I take photos, the woman does not look up from her work. Her hands move quickly against the strings, and the wooden weaving machine makes a strong clicking noise every time she finishes one round.

The heavy metal bridge that dominates this town is surprisingly large. It is sturdy and well-engineered – a first-world marvel, incongruous in this third-world landscape. The bridge was built to carry large vehicles, while the narrow, swaying bridges we had crossed in Nepal were meant for goats and people. Building the bridge must have been a logistical feat, involving the transportation of steel, raw material, machines, and manpower across impossible terrain. But why expend such enormous cost and effort? Perhaps the Chinese authorities view this bridge not just as a convenience but as an expression of power. It is their stamp on the Tibetan landscape.

When Katy, Sperello, and Jeff arrive, their faces are flushed and excited. They have passed their first test. They have scaled the heights of the Naru La pass.

‘I was nervous,’ Katy says, her smile bright and wide. ‘But I made it’.

The group assembles and poses for photos. The assistant guide, along with three crew members, is to leave us. On the other side of the border we will have other assistants. The mules will be replaced by yaks. Chhiring warns us that we must not take photographs near the outpost. We must not carry any pictures of the Dalai Lama, nor any of his writings, and we must not speak his name.

Chhiring and the cook herd us across the steel bridge over the Karnali. We are now in Tibet. Tibet is the roof of the world, and the Ngari province, through which we are entering it, is known as the roof of the roof of the world for its towering altitudes.

At the outpost, young Chinese soldiers with severe haircuts and stony faces search our luggage. They open every bag, riffle through every book, open every stick of lip balm, shake out every bra and pair of underpants and sanitary product. Pallu

and I exchange looks, shaking our heads. Airport security checks seem benign compared to this pointed probing that feels less like a search and more like a violation. I pull my jacket tighter around my shoulders.

We meet our new guide, a Tibetan man assigned to us by the Chinese government. His name is Nyima. He is broad, almost chubby. His skin is smooth, unlike Chhiring's, which has been prematurely wrinkled by the sun and the mountain wind. Nyima looks on as the soldiers hunt for any signs of the Dalai Lama. We wonder if this Tibetan man is a spy, a traitor to his people. But Nyima seems friendly enough and gives us a working cell phone. After days without contact, we can finally talk to our families. We thank him, though this does not lessen our inexplicable scepticism of this quiet man.

As Pallu paces the ground while chatting on Nyima's cell phone, her face lights up. 'How are you? What are you doing? Has anything changed since I left?'

Her husband, Ashok, must be relieved to hear her voice. Like Hari, Ashok worries. Pallu speaks to her mother, who is taking care of the kids. Pallu's sociable, gregarious personality livens up the house and she is the emotional fulcrum of her family.

'Everyone is fine! I think they are finally missing me,' she says, handing me the phone. 'Maybe I should go away more often.'

She is missing them too. What a long while it's been since we left home!

When I dial, Hari picks up. 'Tell me everything,' he says.

I don't know where to start, so I ask him what is happening at home and how the kids are doing. It is so good to hear his voice and to hear of home that I forget about the soldier nearby, wordlessly looking through my most private things.

Sperello is next, talking to his wife in bursts of Italian.

Behind me are excited voices. Ying is talking with a couple of soldiers. They are from home, she tells me, her eyes glowing. The soldiers, intuiting her meaning, smile at us and nod in agreement. Ying grew up in the Sichuan Province in China in a town bordering Tibet. These soldiers are from her town. For young men from the Chinese countryside, the army provides a ticket to a better life, and many of the soldiers from these military camps are sent to the borders of China and Tibet. They are stationed far from home, and the sight of a friendly face has left them grinning.

Ying tells me later that she wonders about the word 'border'. It bears such a

strong meaning of separation. But when you are at the border line, the meaning seems to disappear. There is only the earth on both sides. Perhaps, Ying says, these soldiers do not take borders all that seriously. There is a place, and the soldiers have to guard it, and maybe that is all the word means to them. As the soldiers chat with her, they are as Ying sees them: young men on duty in faraway places who have left behind a mother, a brother, a sweetheart, a hometown.

We are taken to a small, depressing cement box of a building where we wait for hours for medical tests to be done, papers to be checked, more permits to be issued. We adjust our clocks; China is two hours and fifteen minutes ahead of Nepal.

Then, we are taken to Purang, which caters to Chinese soldiers, officials, tourists, and pilgrims. It is the first and largest town we will see in Tibet. This town is striking only in its drabness. Small, boxy buildings of cement have sprung up like warts. Purang is like all small places that have been built up so quickly that they have no sense of themselves. It is in stark contrast to both Kathmandu, with it raucous bustle, and the mountain settlements we passed on our journey, with their quiet beauty. The vibrant vests and coloured shirts and jewellery of Humla have given way to mass-produced, ready-made clothes. People look less serene, more wary. I am torn. I do not want to romanticise life in Humla. It is one of crippling poverty, lacking in adequate hospitals and schools. Yet the soullessness of Purang seems tragic in comparison with the beauty we have walked through.

In Purang there is an ATM machine, the first we have seen since Kathmandu. There are grocery stores with toothpaste and combs and everything I could want. I am glad for these small conveniences. I wish I wasn't so glad – they belong, after all, to a world of drab buildings and modernity that seems to have been imposed on this landscape.

Chhiring tells us that here we will be able to find cell phone signals and directs us to a mobile store in an open-air mini-mall that sells SIM cards. The mobile store is crammed with plastic-wrapped technology goods. Pallu and I wander around. Most of the signs are in Chinese. The young man at the counter is a thin fellow with rigidly styled hair and he is of little help. On the computer screen behind him is a young girl wearing too much makeup. The clerk bills us with resentful disinterest before going back to animated flirtatiousness with his girlfriend who's online. The couple giggle and banter in rapid-fire Chinese dialect. It seems surreal that at a

fifteen minutes' drive from here nomads and tribals are living in tents, tending livestock, and praying to the same ancient deities their ancestors prayed to since medieval times.

Our hotel is yet another indistinguishable Purang cement box. The interior looks basic but clean. One wall in the lobby corridor is lined with framed pictures of Mount Kailash, taken from various angles in different seasons. It reminds me that our destination is no longer remote – Kailash is only hours away. Pallu, Prarthana, and I are sharing a large room with beds that seem larger than our tents. In the en-suite western-style bathroom, the water is piping hot. It has been days since I bathed. With this steaming bucket bath, I feel as steeped in luxury as a maharani would have felt in her marbled tub filled with flowers, bath oils, and rose-scented water.

By evening, the hotel has run out of water and the toilet does not flush. A gagging stench permeates our room. We waylay Chhiring in the hallway and rant about the intolerable conditions and by that night, we have just enough water to flush. It is not until much later that I remember the hole-in-the-ground tented bathrooms we used in our campsites. None of us had said a word back then.

We have dinner at The Peacock, a Chinese restaurant recommended in a guidebook. I am sceptical. In a tiny place like this, how good can the restaurants be? Besides, who would name a Chinese restaurant The Peacock? As with the Indian restaurant in Nepalgunj, I am entirely (and happily) proven wrong. Chicken and greens in a savoury white gravy; perfectly flavoured noodles; fresh, crunchy vegetables – the food is so good that even Katy and Ying, who have grown up eating authentic Chinese food, end the meal with nods of approval.

The following morning, our luggage is packed into vehicles and everyone climbs in. On our way out of town, we stop at a poorly ventilated grocery store to pick up bottled water, biscuits, and other supplies. Despite the previous night's scrumptious dinner, what a relief it is to leave this dusty, cement-box wasteland of Purang!

Later, I learn that The Peacock was, in fact, appropriately named. The Karnali is called the Peacock River, and its source, 30 kilometres from Purang, is known in Tibetan as the Peacock's Mouth. Purang was the ancient capital of the Tibetan Purang Kingdom, and Sudhana Buddha, an earlier incarnation of the Gautama Buddha, is said to have lived there. The ruins of the famous Nine-Storey

Monastery, the Tsegu Gompa, lie on a hill nearby. The local Korchang Gompa temple has an image of Jowo – the Lord of Compassion – one amongst the three most famous images in Tibet. Though Purang has a rich history, I was so absorbed by its ATMs, SIM cards, and the hotel plumbing that I was blinded to the unexpected, hidden richness of this place.

First Sight

Rakshas Tal, Tibet

Altitude ~ 4,600 metres

UNTIL WE REACH KAILASH we must not walk around unaccompanied within the restricted area of Tibet. We must be driven everywhere under the continuous supervision of our assigned guide, the unflappable Nyima. Any deviation from our plan must first be approved by the Chinese authorities. With these severe injunctions in mind, we set out for the day.

As the white Land Cruiser winds along the black tar roads, I peer out of the window, resting my chin on my fist. The roads have been cut through a vast landscape that looks like a sand-less, rocky desert. Although it seems impossible for anything to grow here, almost-invisible shrubs dot the slopes, and a few small deer and mountain goats tug at them. For centuries, nomads have cultivated barley and wheat, which they then trade in the plains. Along the way they still stop at the places we have crossed so far: Purang, and Yalbang Chaur meadow.

Next to me, Prarthana exclaims and points out of the window. 'Look, look!' she cries. In the distance, near the horizon, Mount Kailash stands outlined against a bright blue sky.

The Tibetans call Kailash Gang Rinpoche (Precious Snow Mountain). Even from this distance, Kailash stands out. It is both physically removed from the other mountains and structurally unique, with its wide-based triangular shape. The colours, too, are different, as the snow shines brighter against the darkness of the

stone. Formed from metamorphic rocks of the tertiary geological era, Kailash is made of stone that is darker, denser, and older than the stone of the surrounding mountains. Kailash, which existed even at the time of the Tethys Sea, is the tallest geological deposit of its kind in the world.

I have seen many pictures of the mountain, but nothing can compare to seeing it here before us, its peak towering above the other ranges. There it is, Mount Kailash, shaped like a pyramid, a lingam, a man reclined, a face. We all clamber out and take picture after picture. The basic cameras that Pallu and I have brought will not capture the magnificence of the mountain. But could anything do it justice? Can a picture, however carefully composed, capture the exhilaration of a first sighting?

We get back into the jeep. We are not scheduled to visit Kailash yet. Today, our destination is Lake Manasarovar. On the way, we are to make a stop at Lake Rakshas Tal, the Lake of the Asuras (Anti-Gods). While Manasarovar, the Lake of the Gods, is sacred, the waters of Rakshas Tal are said to be poisonous. Manasarovar is depicted as a circular sun-lake, and Rakshas Tal as a semi-circular moon-lake. Sun and moon, gods and demons, sacred and poisonous, sit side by side in the shadow of Mount Kailash.

At Rakshas Tal I expect to find gloom and grey waters, but I am wrong. The lake is breathtaking. Its salt water is so blue it seems almost unnatural. To our right is the south face of Mount Kailash, a dark monolith with a groove cut down the middle. The groove looks like an enormous ladder. Everyone takes pictures, and Chhiring brings out snacks. Prarthana stays in the car while Pallu and I head down to the water.

Rakshas Tal is a vast expanse of iridescent water. Its shores are pebbled, and in the midst of its soft waves sit little islands like floating fists. Chhiring says that at low water points, the locals take their yaks to the islands to graze. How splendid these islands appear in their silent isolation! I wish that I could wade on to an island to meditate in the midst of this gentle blue. Chhiring points out the one island the locals avoid. In Hindu mythology, this is where Ravana sat and prayed to Shiva. Ravana prayed for years, until Shiva came down from Kailash and granted him a boon. Ravana, a great devotee of Shiva, is the villain of the great Hindu epic, the Ramayana, which tells of how he carried away Rama's wife, Sita, thereby inciting a great war. Ravana's presence poisoned the waters of Rakshas Tal.

But how pure the water looks, how clear it is, how gently the waves rise and fall on the surface! It seems impossible that Rakshas Tal could be poisonous. I cup my hands and, surreptitiously, in case Pallu or Chhiring or anyone else watching, tries to stop me, I take a tiny sip. It tastes exactly like what it is: cool, fresh, slightly salty water.

'Why did you do that?' Pallu asks, when I tell her about it later.

'Just to prove that the poison thing is only superstition.'

'Prove to whom?'

'I don't know. Maybe everyone. Maybe me. Anyway, I drank the Rakshas Tal water and I'm alive. See? No poison!' I shrug.

Pallu shakes her head and says, 'Any need?'

Katy is at the shore, making a cairn with rocks. She calls us over. Although we've met her only a few days earlier, she feels like an old friend. When she smiles, her face transforms, and her eyes light up; tiny freckles stretching across her delicate features.

Katy adds a stone, and then Pallu does, then I. The waters of Rakshas Tal make a gentle sound as they lap against the rocks near the shore. We talk about our trip, the lake, the beauty around us, the sun, and Kailash. I take a picture of our cairn and I decide to dedicate the cairn to friendship. As we watch the water and the islands, I share with them my fleeting thought of walking to one of the islands of this lake to meditate.

'You meditate?' Katy asks. She says she does too, and asks if we might meditate together.

We each choose a spot facing the lake, and sit there in silent meditation. At the Lake of the Anti-Gods, for the first time on this trip, I feel my breath turn soft.

Why We Worship the Gods We Worship

YEARS AGO, WHEN I lived in America, my colleagues and I once had lunch in a Vietnamese restaurant with a client from Alabama. Midway through the meal, the client asked me a question. He asked how we Hindus could pray to an Elephant God. (Ganesha, the son of Shiva and Parvathi, has an elephant head.)

'I mean, it's an elephant!' he said, his eyes wide with disbelief, his palms upturned. 'Who worships an elephant?'

The question unnerved me. Why did we worship these gods? In India, we have grown up in a culture that reveres gods, who, when you think about it, are really hard to explain. Not only did we have an Elephant God, we had a Monkey God, Snake Gods, tree spirits, and countless others. As I struggled to answer the man's question, I felt a lot was at stake. It seemed as though all Hindus, from time immemorial, were watching over my shoulder, waiting for me to come up with a compelling explanation. But I was singularly unsuited to the task of expounding the Hindu worldview. First, I lacked any religious beliefs; second, I had never really considered this question before.

It's not as if I am afraid to question things. In a temple, I'd once had an intense discussion with a pujari (priest) during which I had questioned whether rituals are meaningful, considering how one of Hinduism's goals is to rid oneself of maya (illusion) and to understand the essential truth at every moment. We conducted

this discussion while my family was absorbed in performing rituals inside the temple. Although I had questioned many things, I had never questioned why we Hindus worshipped our gods.

Perhaps it is because in our culture the gods are so ubiquitous, you barely even notice them. Our music and dance are devotional, our art depicts our gods and myths, and most of our beloved stories are about our gods. Roadside shops are named after them; you will have a Sri Venkateshwara Tiffin House, a Sai Baba Barber Shop, and, in a twist of moral acrobatics, a Ganesh Wine Shop. In India, our gods are everywhere and participate in everything.

As a young girl, I believed in many gods. I believed they looked like the gods in the multi-coloured framed pictures in my mother's puja room, and I believed without question all the godly myths and stories my grandmother told me. And what stories they were! Full of colour and drama, their plots twisted like hairpin bends on steep mountainsides. Our heroes and gods fight wars, flirt, make love, eat too much, and lose their temper. Humans can relate to them. We feel for them and love them with an affection usually reserved for friends and family members. My uncle often says that he will touch the cheeks of Lakshmi, the Goddess of Wealth, and ask her, the dear that she is, to bring him his fortune. 'What is up with that Lord Shiva?' my aunt will say during mythological movies. 'He is so easily duped and gives boons to all kinds of people!'

In my parents' home, my mother primarily worshipped various avatars of Vishnu, the God of Preservation. As a child, I was somewhat frightened by Shiva. But as I grew older, I found Shiva to be the most fascinating god of all.

The Shiva image is sensational, as it combines the elemental with the esoteric, producing mesmerising visuals. Snakes coil and slither around Shiva's neck as living, venomous ornaments. Other Hindu gods are clad in silk, while Shiva wears tiger skin. Instead of a beautiful, jewelled crown like the one Vishnu wears, Shiva's head is adorned with a pile of matted hair, in which the crescent moon glows like a diamond. He smears his forehead with lines of ash. He has three eyes, and the third is so powerful that, when opened, it incinerates everything it gazes upon. While these depictions may seem ungodly, everything is symbolic. The third eye denotes the capacity to see beyond space and time. The lines of ash on the forehead depict the various mental stages in the evolution of human consciousness. The moon

represents compassion.

Shiva has many aspects, each denoting a certain quality or mood. As Sadashiva, his dance is benevolent and destroys illusion, so truth can be realised. As Neelakantha, he is the protector, one whose throat has been made blue by the poison he drank from the oceans in order to save the world. As the ancient, pre-Aryan Rudra, he is the patron of good and bad, of kings and thieves. As the terrible Kala Bhairava, he roams cremation grounds and smears himself with the ashes of the dead until he turns blue and starts dancing frenzied and uncontrolled, burning everything, so that new things can come to be. As Kala Bhairava, he is the supreme destroyer, representing kala (time), the greatest annihilator of all. (In some versions, Buddha Demchok of Kailash is said to be the Buddhist version of Kala Bhairava.) In all these stories, Shiva stands for animistic innocence and great wisdom – an implication that often these are one and the same. The variegated aspects of Shiva are said to be amalgamations of many local deities who, over centuries, fused into a singular idea of Shiva.

Perhaps the reason for our many versions of the same god, and for our many different gods, is that Hinduism is syncretic. It fuses various belief systems to form a tapestry of beliefs and gods. Perhaps this is how Hinduism, or versions of it, managed to survive over centuries. Buddhism, too, has some aspects of this approach. In Tibetan Buddhism, the Indian saint, Padmasambhava, was called by the King of Tibet to quell local demons, who were possibly gods of another local religion. Killing is one kind of conquest, but, in a master stroke of conquest by co-option, Padmasambhava used his extraordinary powers to convince the demons to become protectors of Buddhism in Tibet, adding them to the mix of Buddhist deities who served to preserve the cultural memory associated with the old gods. Perhaps this is what happened in Hindu worship, as local tribal gods were co-opted to become versions of existing Hindu deities.

But how does one explain that Shiva is the God of Destruction? Who worships destruction? While my Christian and Muslim friends pray to a Creator God, we have a Destroyer God, and our Creator God, Brahma, is deemed unfit for worship.

That day at lunch, as I tried to answer the client's question, I mumbled something about symbolism and the concept of worshipping the formless (Nirguna Brahman) within the form (Saguna Brahman), but this did not sound convincing,

least of all to myself. How might I explain the idea that one can be many, and many can be one, and that both can be an equally valid representation of a truth? And yet, this probably was as good an answer as any. It was, in any case, perhaps the only one that could resonate with a monotheistic worldview. For many Hindus, a belief in multitudes of gods does not preclude a belief in a formless consciousness. As a Hindu, you can believe in one or many gods, or you can believe in one supreme consciousness. Or both. Or neither. You can, in fact, have it all.

I wish I had told the client that Hindus worship different gods for different reasons. They worship Shiva because destruction, like creation and preservation, is a part of the circle of life and is worthy of worship. Since nothing new can come to be until the old passes away, Shiva symbolises that the transience of all things is both necessary and good. Hindus worship Shiva's son, Ganesha, the Elephant God, because he represents the quality of discernment and good fortune. They worship Parvathi because she represents great power. They worship each god for different reasons and all gods for the same reasons. They look upon the various gods as beacons of refuge in troubled times, and as divine beings striving to maintain dharmic order – which is the ethical and moral code of the Hindus. Buddhists, too, have a version of dharma (dhamma, in Pali) though it differs somewhat from the Hindu version. Dharma or dhamma governs society, animals, the cosmos, and even the gods themselves.

Years have passed since the client asked me that question. I had forgotten about it. But being in these places, where faith and legend are as real as latitude, longitude, soil, and stone, brings to mind the question that had faded away into the distant recesses of memory. Now, in the Land of the Gods, the same land where they have walked, slept, eaten and bathed, the answer comes to me. Hindus worship their gods for the same reason anyone worships their gods – because the gods mean something to them.

Dipping, Cleansing

Lake Manasarovar, Tibet, Altitude ~ 4,600 metres

ACCORDING TO HINDU MYTHOLOGY, divine beings had once appealed to Brahma, the Lord of Creation, for a place to ritually cleanse themselves before praying to Shiva, in nearby Kailash. Brahma then used the force of his Manas (consciousness) and willed the Sarovar (lake) into reality. The lake is believed to be of such purity that anyone who takes a dip in it will wash away a lifetime of sins. Heavenly beings, it is said, have been descending into the lake at night as lights gliding down from the sky. Every year there are reported sightings of strange lights hovering over Lake Manasarovar in the hours before dawn. People believe these lights to be divine beings.

In Buddhist mythology too, Lake Manasarovar is a holy place. It is where Maya, the Buddha's mother, bathed before conceiving him. Buddhists believe this lake to be the physical manifestation of Lake Anottata, the Lake at the Centre of the World, or the Lake without Heat, in which one dip can wash away the heat of sin forever. Myths aside, I cannot wait to see the Lake.

When we reach Manasarovar it is past noon. The morning sun has dimmed and is hiding behind the clouds. After I climb out of the jeep, I hang back a bit from the group and its excited chatter. I see dull, blue-grey water covering the lake, scrawny copper-brown grass lining the shore, and stark grey and red mountains standing between us and the gloomy sky.

Where are the long-necked swans gliding serenely on the lake? Where are the green reeds and grasses swaying in the breeze? The landscape is surreal, like the imaginary world of a dystopian science fiction novel. After having feasted my eyes on the beauty of the salt-water Lake of the Anti-Gods – Rakshas Tal – the freshwater Lake of the Gods seems uninspiring and eerie. Swallowing my disappointment, I hurry to the campsite where our tents are being set up by Chhiring and his team.

'Kavi! Manasarovar!' Pallu says, her face glowing.

'Yup.' I try to smile.

'You know, I wasn't sure we would actually make it,' Pallu says.

By the time you reach a certain age, you know what you are, and you know what you're not. One thing I know is that Pallu and I are not the persisting kind; we're the kind of people who go with the flow. But not this time. Despite the passage of time, failed attempts, and our husbands' concerns, we kept the idea of this trip alive. We made it happen. The destination is important, but the journey to get there and the persistence in the face of setbacks are important, too.

'It is amazing, Pallu! We're actually here. In Manas.'

'The water of Lake Rakshas Tal looks different,' I tell Chhiring. 'It's blue. Here, the waters look grey.'

He says it is just the light. The two lakes are connected by the Ganga Chu channel and the same water fills them both. When the channel is full, it means things are good for Tibet.

'These days, Ganga Chu not as full before,' Chhiring says.

The Chinese are mining the mountains in Tibet for gold, minerals, and oil, he tells us. The rivers are being dammed, and the water is being diverted to China. There are rumours that the waters of Lake Manasarovar are also being suctioned off (though I cannot see any evidence of this). There is development, but it does not reach everywhere, and the environmental damage is extensive.

'And the Tibetans? What do they say?' I ask him.

'What can they say?' Chhiring shakes his head. The Tibetans are voiceless.

Katy tells us everyone is going for a dip in the lake. Do we want to join them?

'Wait for us!' Pallu says.

We rummage through our bags for towels.

‘It’s going to be so cold in there.’ Pallu shivers.

‘The waters of the lake are supposed to wash away your sins. Don’t you want your sins to be washed away?’

‘If I had known I would be able to wash away my sins, I would have sinned some more,’ Pallu says. We are laughing as we swing our backpacks and head to the lake.

Chhiring tells us to be careful. The water is cold and may slow down our blood circulation, putting us in danger of altitude sickness. I nod, but his warnings hardly register. All I am thinking about is Lake Manasarovar. I am walking on its banks, and I will dip in its waters and sleep on its shores.

The heat from the sun and the icy cold air mingle on my cheeks. Gravelly bits scrunch under our boots as we walk past embankments of mud and soft stone, stratified into strips of coffee-brown and peach. Mani rocks are strewn along the path. Inside crevices are offerings to the Gods of the Lake: yak horns and butter lamps, burnt black.

‘I’m going in!’ I shout and run in. I hold my breath and duck. I want to scream; the water is freezing. In the shock of the intense chill, I am awake to everything: the thumping of my heart, the awful cold, my clothes rippling back and forth in the water. I am submerged for only a few seconds, but it is enough. I run out. Shivering, I change into dry clothes before the cold sets into my bones.

Pallu wades in slowly, sinks in carefully. Seconds later, she is back up, clutching something in her right hand. I squint in the sunlight. Is that a rudraksha mala? The rudrakasha mala is a string of large brown prayer beads, used to worship Shiva. Pallu opens her hand and looks at the mala in surprise. After a moment, she closes her hand around the beads and wades out of the lake as slowly as she waded in.

Lights on the Lake

Lake Manasarovar, Tibet
Altitude ~ 4,600 metres

BACK IN OUR TENT, Pallu begins to wrap the mala in cloth.

I reach out and stroke its hard, grooved beads. The mala is a revered symbol of Shiva worship. Its beads are berries from the rudraksha tree, believed to have sprouted from the tears of Shiva. Many Hindus would consider finding the mala in the lake to be a special sign and blessing from Shiva. My cousin puts it away as if it were a rock or a shell, her usually expressive face appearing impassive.

'Don't you think it was incredible?' I ask her.

'Well, I think the mala is special. I don't know about the circumstances of finding it. That was just luck,' she says with a shrug.

She is right, of course. It is serendipity. I am quiet. Usually, I am the sceptic and she the believer.

Birds on Lake Manasarovar. *Photo by Sperello*

Prayer flags at Lake Manasarovar. *Photo by Jeff*

Mount Kailash looms in the distance on the road to Lake Manasarovar. *Photo by Sperello*

Chiu Gompa, the Bird Monastery. *Photo by Sperello*

A view of Lake Manasarovar from Chiu Gompa. *Photo by Sperello*

Prayer wheels at Chiu Gompa. *Photo by Jeff*

Arriving in Darchen. *Photo by Jeff*

Kavitha and Pallu in Darchen. *Photo by Sperello*

Deer grazing on the road to Darchen. *Photo by Sperello*

Locals in colourful clothing at Darchen. *Photo by Jeff*

A tribal woman in Darchen. *Photo by Jeff*

A pilgrim on Day 1 of the Mount Kailash parikrama. *Photo by Ying*

Prarthana, Chhiring, and Ying with the horse lady and their assistants on Day 1 of the parikrama. *Photo by Katy*

A chorten with Mount Kailash in the background. *Photo by Ying*

Pallu is not religious, but she keeps an open mind when it comes to faith and is often moved by spiritual ideas and music. At boarding school, we would attend morning assemblies twice a week, during which we'd chant and sing. Pallu's favourite song was by the 15th century poet, Kabir Das.

'*Issa Tan, Dhan Ki Koan*? Who owns this body and wealth? When I look into your eyes, I see only the earth.'

This meditation on the impermanence of the physical and the material world is resonant of the ethos of Shiva.

The song contains striking imagery. Hindus cremate their dead, and Kabir writes of the funeral pyre, 'Your arm will burn like a log of wood, and your hair will blaze like a bundle of burning grass.' It is a sombre song, but it does not surprise me that Pallu loves it. In its austere cadences is a deep sense of peace.

A year ago, Pallu joined a weekly chanting group that meets near her house in Hyderabad. Chanting brings back the feeling of tranquillity she had felt as a child.

In melding her voice with a chorus of others, she feels a sense of community. It is, perhaps, the closest she has come to maintaining a regular spiritual practice.

I can't stop marvelling at the coincidence. Shiva's necklace had floated into Pallu's hands in the lake created for the worship of Shiva. The image of Pallu, waist-deep in the waters of Manasarovar, holding up the mala, stays in my head. I can still see, in her raised hand, the wet beads glistening in the sun.

We have an early dinner. Katy talks about the dip in the lake, Sperello and Prarthana exchange banter. I hardly pay attention: even listening to conversation tires me. I force myself to eat, though everything has the same insipid aftertaste. Relieved that the meal is over, I head to the tent and check my blood pressure. It has increased again: 160/100. Katy, who once was a nurse, confirms the reading. Tell me what to do, Katy, I want to say. Am I going to be okay? Should I carry on? But this is not her decision to make.

Chhiring connects me to Hari. Hari, in turn, consults a doctor who treated soldiers on duty in Himalayan altitudes. The doctor's feedback is reassuring. Elevated blood pressure is not uncommon in high altitudes. He informs us that a quarter of the people who trek experience some mild form of altitude sickness. I should be fine in the morning, so there's no need to worry. But I am worried. I increase my dose of blood pressure medicine and lie awake for hours, staring at the top of the tent.

At around three in the morning, I hear Prarthana calling my name. She has heard my restless shuffling emanating from the tent. She needs to use the toilet and wants to know if I want to go too. We prefer not to go alone, in case someone falls or gets sick or encounters human-eating dogs.

'Coming. Just a sec,' I say.

'Wait,' Prarthana says. 'What's that?'	

'What?' I crawl out of the tent.

'Over there! Look!' She points to the lake. I see a light hovering on the other side. It is big and round and it vibrates.

'Maybe someone camping on the other shore?' I say as the light dims and glows bright. What else could it be?

'But it's not on land. Is it?' We are both wondering the same thing. Are mythical heavenly beings descending upon the lake?

A full minute passes before Prarthana thinks of waking Pallu.

'Pallu, Pallu!' I run into our tent. 'You have to see this!'

By the time my cousin comes hurrying out of her tent, the light has disappeared. I want to kick myself for not having called her sooner. The three of us stand there for a while, staring at the lake. The light does not reappear.

Chiu Gompa, the Bird Monastery

Lake Manasarovar, Tibet
Altitude ~ 4,600 metres

WHAT WILL I TELL everyone when I get home? I glimpsed a light on the lake – that was real. But how much of what I read into it was true? My meditation teacher says that the mind is a tricky thing.

Was this the light of divine beings descending upon the earth or a light from a campsite on the opposite shore? I wonder if the people on the other side saw Prarthana's flashlight and stood still, marvelling at the possibility of heavenly beings hovering on the lake. Was the light we saw merely a mirror reflection of a mutual longing to believe in a beautiful story? Then again, the light hovered on the lake, not on the shore. Prarthana saw it; I saw it. Last night, I believed what I perceived was true. In the light of day, I have only questions.

'Kavi, Pallu! Wake up! Coffee!' Chhiring calls.

I am already awake. In the cold morning air, a member of Chhiring's crew deposits two mugs of hot black coffee outside our tent. This is a luxury as well as an effective wake-up call. We must crawl out of our sleeping bags and fetch the coffee immediately otherwise it will grow cold within seconds.

Every morning, Pallu and I find it absurdly difficult to pack our sleeping bags. It requires joint effort: she holds open my sack while I stuff my sleeping bag into it, and then I do the same for her.

'All set,' Pallu says, pulling close the drawstrings of the bag.

This morning we don't have to drive far. Overlooking Lake Manasarovar, sprawled on a small and rugged hillock, is the Chiu Gompa monastery complex.

At first sight, Chiu Gompa reminds me of a giant anthill on a mound. The likeness is not just in shape but also in its reddish-brown hue. *Chiu* means 'bird' or 'sparrow' in Tibetan, and that is how the buildings look – like birds perched on a hill. The windows, outlined with orange-red, add the only touch of colour to the structures, while the top of the hill is a swaying mass of ropes trailing red, yellow and blue prayer flags.

For Tibetan Buddhists, Chiu Gompa is one of the holiest places. The temple complex had grown around a cave in which Guru Rinpoche (or Padmasambhava) meditated with his consort shortly before his death. As the last site of Guru Rinpoche, the monastery bears enormous significance. And yet it seems curiously lifeless and the simple, rough buildings scarcely reflect its importance. But then, the Chiu Gompa I see now is not the Chiu Gompa of its heydays. This used to be an active monastery and a centre for learning until the Chinese all but destroyed it in the years following their invasion of Tibet. Although the structure was restored to its current state in the 1980s, the walls, the doorway, and the narrow and uneven interior stairs still seem dilapidated. The Chiu Gompa monastery is not an isolated case. Before the Chinese invasion there were more than 6,000 monasteries in Tibet; by 1976, only thirteen remained.

A couple of monks listlessly pass us by. An older monk takes us on a guided tour of the place. He seems resentful; his face is sullen. We have heard that the original monks were killed and replaced by these Chinese implants. I'm struck by the jarring contrast between this place and the vibrant and happy Yalbang Monastery in Humla. Sperello shakes his head as we follow the monk. While the physical destruction is obvious, the destruction of a culture and the conquest of the minds of a people, though less evident, is palpable.

In Tibet, you feel watched at all times. Guards at checkpoints police vast and empty roads. The locals seem hostile and wary. But who can blame them? I cannot imagine living under such scrutiny, knowing that I could be pulled up and arrested at any time and for any reason.

To most of us, the story seems clear: Tibet has been invaded by the Chinese, its people are being oppressed, and its culture is being eradicated. For Ying, however, it

is not so simple.

She grew up in China, where, she says, she was brainwashed. In primary school and up to middle school, Chinese children were taught the official Chinese narrative – that the Dalai Lama was an evil and corrupt sorcerer who exploited, poisoned, and enslaved his people. They called him a wolf in sheep's clothing. According to the Chinese, the Tibetans were terrified of the Dalai Lama and hated him. Students were taught that China's invasion of Tibet in the early 1950s was a welcome liberation for which the Tibetans were grateful. The children were told that any other interpretation of these events was a lie made up by immoral Westerners opposed to China. To a young Ying, these were indisputable facts recorded in history books. Growing up, she never really thought about Tibet much. She was apolitical and the situation there did not impact her life. Her views stayed unchanged for years, even after she moved to New Jersey and became an American citizen.

In 2009, Ying went on a tour to Tibet. The Chinese government had assigned a driver and a guide, both Tibetan, to escort her everywhere. They travelled in a four-wheel drive across the country: Lhasa, Shigatse, Everest base camp, and small towns and villages along the way. Over that month-long trip, she spoke with some locals and with her guide and her driver. To her surprise, Ying realised that the Tibetans did not hate the Dalai Lama, neither did they consider him evil. Realising that the truth was far from what she had been taught, Ying began to question her history lessons. Over the years, she read books by scholars and had discussions with a wide range of people. With time, her views changed.

Yet, it is not an easy situation to be in. When our small group debates the China-Tibet situation, Ying seems conflicted between what she has discovered and her loyalty towards her country.

Sperello points out that China had invaded Tibet, which had been an independent nation till then.

Ying tells him that given Tibet's geopolitical significance, the Western powers would have occupied it, and that China's invasion was a pre-emptive strike against a future Western attempt at conquest and colonisation.

'That,' Ying admits, 'is still no justification for invasion, but it was China's motivation for invading Tibet.'

‘But still, China is occupying Tibet against the will of its people,’ Sperello persists.

‘And you saw how the monasteries have been ruined,’ Katy adds, the colour rising to her face. ‘You saw how the monks were treated. What was the reason for destroying monasteries or for killing monks?’

‘I am horrified at the killing. But did you know that the monks were soldiers? Most Westerners are probably not aware of that fact. And the monasteries had arms and guns,’ says Ying. Tibet was not a secular society and the monks there were not just meditating and studying; they in fact formed the government and fought their enemies. A war with Tibet meant a war with the monasteries.

‘Not all monks were fighters,’ Sperello points out. Dob-dobs, the warrior monks, were trained in martial arts and acted as policemen in Tibetan monasteries. But they were not many; upper estimates place the dob-dobs at 10 per cent of the monk population.

He goes on, ‘A war does not justify the destruction of an entire culture.’ The monastery was not only a place of worship, but also a centre for Tibetan cultural life; for its dance, music and art; for its community events and its literature. With the destruction of the monasteries, an entire way of life had been wiped out. After the cultural revolution, a generation of Tibetans grew up without learning their own language in school, or their own history. This was not merely a physical destruction of a place, but an erasure of a mental landscape.

‘Of course,’ Ying says, nodding. She looks away.

Sperello seems eager to say more, but silence falls over the group.

It is difficult for Ying. She has friends whose fathers served the Chinese army in Tibet. For her to denounce China’s actions in Tibet would mean devaluing their service to her country. I remember the Chinese soldiers at the Hilsa border. I regarded them as hostile agents. Ying saw them as familiar and friendly young men from home, doing their duty to keep their country safe.

The West, Ying points out later, is not without its own atrocities. In Peru, while visiting the Inca ruins of Machu Picchu, she was making her way to its famed entrance – the Sun Gate – when she stopped to rest for a few minutes. There she met an American tourist. Unprompted, the American began to lecture Ying about China’s oppression in Tibet.

'What makes him think he can just walk up to me and start talking like that? If he wants to talk about the injustices of history, what about the Spanish colonial rule in Peru?' she asks. 'We were in Peru. The Spanish decimated Peru. What does he think about that? Why lecture me about China, in Peru?'

I want to point out that the Chinese are still occupying Tibet, while the colonial powers were driven out decades ago. But that is not the point she is making.

She continues, 'It happened. Whatever anyone thinks about it, it happened. History is full of injustices. Like many events in history, the invasion of Tibet is terrible. I never felt that Tibet was part of China, not even as a child, despite being brainwashed. I have great sympathy for the Tibetans. Of course, they are being oppressed. They do not have the freedom to speak. They cannot go where they want. It is hard for them to even get a passport. Do the Tibetans want and deserve independence? Yes. But can they get it without suffering violence and death? No. The violence will be appalling and the death toll will be horrific.'

People would have said the same of India's struggle for independence from the British. Yet India had won it. But Ying's observations are astute – the Tibetan struggle comes at a frightening cost.

She goes on, 'China claims Tibet is a part of China. But if you claim that a place is part of you, you must make the people feel they are part of you too, and treat them well. Tibet's people need economic development. They need freedom. They should be able to practise their religion and culture. But the Chinese government does not want to lose control. It is not just Tibet, it is all over China. Even the native Han Chinese do not have full political freedom. It is ridiculous that the Chinese people cannot get books about Tibet even today.'

Ying is right. The Cultural Revolution scarred China in many ways. Deeply rooted in the Buddhist, Confucian, and Taoist systems, China had its own vast and rich heritage. In the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution, Chinese temples were razed, Chinese monks were shamed and executed in public parades, and priceless Chinese manuscripts were thrown into bonfires.

The Chinese authorities, naturally, have their own views. They point out that the 1950 invasion did away with the feudal systems of traditional Tibetan society. (Of course, this process could have taken effect over time and more organically, like in many other Asian and European countries.) The Chinese also claim that they have

been building better infrastructure and helping the Tibetan mindset towards modernity. While complete religious freedom remains elusive, they claim things are changing. In recent years, the Chinese government has eased restrictions on religious worship, which they say extends to Tibet as well to some extent.

Nevertheless, no one in our group would dare to utter the Dalai Lama's name anywhere in Tibet. No one would dare carry his picture. None of us could forget those soldiers searching every corner of our bags. In Lake Manasarovar, a couple of western tourists had told us of two Tibetans who had approached them, whispering 'Dalai Lama, Dalai Lama'. They were hungry for a fragment of their beloved leader: his words, an image, even a scrap of news.

In Chiu Gompa, an old man turns the prayer wheels. The waters of Lake Manasarovar glint blue in the mid-morning sun, and the north face of Mount Kailash is resplendent in white and black. The lake and the mountain stand as they have for millennia: oblivious to the humans who struggle to place them within the boundaries of their futile ambitions.

Last Town

Darchen, Tibet
Altitude ~ 4,600 metres

OUR COOK'S WIFE DELIVERED a baby. When Jeff and Sperello congratulate him, he says it is not his baby but his brother's. We all wonder at the cook's wide smile as he conveys this news. Chhiring tells us the cook is a polyandry husband.

My mother's uncle is an anthropologist who, decades ago, worked with Himalayan tribes, among whom polyandry is not uncommon. His research assistant once saw a tribal girl walking with a young child.

'Lovely boy! Is he your son?' asked the researcher.

'No,' replied the woman, 'he is my husband.'

By marrying the eldest of several brothers, she had become the wife of all the brothers, including the youngest. This is a form of fraternal polyandry, where all brothers share one wife. Since these barren, rocky lands can support only the sparsest of populations, polyandry is an effective form of population control in a patriarchal system. It is also an economic necessity, as more hands are needed to feed one family.

On another occasion, the intrepid Himalayan researcher was with a group of tribal women when a woman from another village passed them by. After the initial chit-chat, the group of women asked the stranger how many husbands she had.

'One,' she replied, eyes downcast.

The villagers could not believe it. Just one husband?

'Why?' they asked the stranger. 'You're healthy. You are good-looking. How is it you have only one husband?'

The women in the group fell silent as they contemplated the sad fate of a perfectly healthy woman with just one husband.

The cook's marriage scenario has given rise to some jokes. But to the Indians in the group, fraternal polyandry seems less strange.

'It's like Draupadi,' Prarthana points out.

In the Hindu epic, the Mahabharata, Princess Draupadi marries all the brothers of the Pandava clan. But Draupadi's marriage is not the only unusual marital arrangement in Hindu tradition. We have other marriage customs that would seem strange to foreigners. Arranged marriages are still the norm in most of India. In Telugu culture, avunculate marriages and cousin marriages were once common. Some, in the Nair community in Kerala, live in a matriarchal society, where after marriage the husband lives in his sister's house and sees his wife only for occasional conjugal visits. In the old days, if a Nair woman wanted to spend the night with another man, she could engage in a temporary marriage, called a Sambandam marriage, during which her temporary husband would leave his shoes outside the front door. If the permanent husband happened to visit on that night, he would see the shoes and return to his home. As my anthropologist great-uncle pointed out, people have invented an astounding range of marital structures.

Given the unique marital practices in India, I thought it best not to chuckle too hard at our cook's unusual marriage situation. In any case, our reactions have not fazed the cook, who is still delighted about the birth of his son.

The cook's happy mood is contagious. From amongst the piles of bags and tents being packed, Chhiring belts out Hindi film songs in a Nepalese accent, wearing a look of mischief. The others laugh and egg him on. He sings even louder and belts out another raucous tune. Finally, when everything has been loaded, we get into the jeeps and set out for Darchen, the town closest to Mount Kailash.

Once an important trading post like Purang, now Darchen is crowded with pilgrims and backpackers. People saunter down the streets, checking out toys, bangles, and mass-produced pants and jackets at rickety roadside stalls. A few single-storeyed cement structures dot the roads. Men lounge around a pool table at the roadside, smoking, while a Tibetan in a poncho and a hat half-heartedly nudges

the ball with a cue. I feel like I am in an old Western movie. I expect Clint Eastwood to pop out of a shop and saunter over to the pool table.

Our guesthouse in Darchen has what must be the filthiest toilets in the world. One room is divided into three cement slots on the concrete floor, and the slot is separated by low walls. All of this is great if you want to have eye-to-eye conversations during your morning rituals.

My room, depressing and airless, has two small single beds and a tiny window. The only bright spot is dinner: pizza, followed by apple pie. When I ask Chhiring and his crew how they managed to score such quintessentially American fare in this remote place, he merely smiles and shrugs. I cannot wait to tell my kids that I ate pizza and apple pie at Kailash.

In the dining hall, a man in a bright red, white, and blue poncho sits across from me. His face is red-brown and greatly weathered, and his shoulder-length hair is topped with a cowboy hat. Nyima tells us the man is a local nomad on his way south to trade. With such bones, colouring, and clothes, he looks like one of the indigenous people I have often seen in the *National Geographic* magazine photographs of Peru or Bolivia. And again, there is the strange sensation of discombobulation: I could be in Peru.

That night, Prarthana comes to our room. The tall, gregarious woman now sits slightly hunched. She perches on the edge of Pallu's bed, holding her hands together on her knees. Is she thinking about her altitude sickness in Humla? She is right to be worried. The trek around Kailash is difficult. The oxygen is so thin that even an ordinary walk can seem tiring.

'Let's make a pact,' Prarthana says. 'If one of us falls sick, all three of us should come back with her.'

There is a long pause.

'I think everyone else should continue. We have come so far,' I say. 'Besides, we will be fine. Even old people make this trip. Why not us?'

I feel less confident than I sound. My blood pressure today was around 190/120, even though I have more than doubled my medication dosage. Pallu says we should wait and see.

The Mountain of the Gods

To Drira Phuk, Mount Kailash, Tibet

CHINESE AUTHORITIES FORBID PEOPLE from climbing Mount Kailash. This is, supposedly, out of deference to religious sentiment, as the climbing of Kailash is deeply offensive to millions of believers. Yet, it is curious and ironic that the Chinese have forbidden it. Such sensitivity seemed absent when they razed temples, slaughtered monks, and burnt down priceless manuscripts. What's stopping them in the case of Kailash?

Rumour has it that in 2001, the Chinese authorities granted a Spanish team permission to climb Mount Kailash. There were cries of outrage from Hindus and Buddhists and the Chinese eventually withdrew the permission. This, too, seems curious. China faces considerable international pressure because of its occupation of Tibet, human rights violations, and other issues. Regardless, they carry on.

Whatever the real reason for the continued Chinese ban on climbing Kailash, the result is that even today, Kailash stands unsullied by human feet. Kailash must not be climbed. Travellers must walk around the mountain in an elliptical path, like planets traversing around a brilliant sun. The Buddhists call this path kora. Hindus call it pradakshina or parikrama. Both faiths believe Mount Kailash to be the centre of the physical and spiritual universe, and that going around it symbolises going around the universe.

It is early morning. Nyima is driving Pallu, Prarthana, Ying, and me to Darpoche, which lies at the foothills of Mount Kailash. Katy, Jeff, and Sperello have started out

at the crack of dawn. They will walk to Darpoche and join us for the parikrama.

In Darpoche, my breath steams in the air. We circle a pole weighted by wisps of prayer flags and strewn with yak horns and bits of coloured cloth. In the distance, a Tibetan sky burial is etched on to a raised, rocky ledge. This ledge had been the burial site for eighty-four mahasiddhis (learned masters). It is no longer in use, as there are not enough vultures to consume the corpses, and too many dogs.

Darpoche is not only the starting point of the Kailash parikrama, it is also the site of the Saga Dawa festival. Had Pallu and I made it to Kailash on our previous attempt, we would have found ourselves in the midst of the Saga Dawa festivities, amongst hundreds of people from all over Tibet gathered for the holy day. We would have watched as the flagpole was lowered. We would have tied new prayer flags and cheered with the crowds when the flagpole was raised again. We would have photographed the rows of orange-robed monks and lamas reciting prayers. We would have been surrounded by the hooting of horns, the beating of drums, the voices of people chanting and praying, and the shouts of children brandishing toys and balloons.

Now, as I stand here with my fellow travellers, I cannot imagine it. The vast, empty spaces of Darpoche are filled with a deep silence.

Kailash looms before us, its head tilted majestically skyward. It is an awe-inspiring sight: this immense mountain of rock and snow against the boundless blue sky. I wonder that the earth does not break under its weight. The magnitude of such places brings into focus the minuteness of self. I am reminded that my bones, my breath, the vicissitudes of my everyday life are mere flickers in an infinite universe.

Two figures are waving us over. It is the German couple we had met in Nepal. Ying goes to join them, and they wait as she digs in her poles and climbs up. The three of them disappear down the path.

From off in the distance, a petite woman in a long blue dress walks towards us, leading a small mountain horse. Her earrings and necklaces of turquoise stones and silver beads shake. Behind her, a deeply wrinkled man of indeterminate age leisurely pulls a larger horse. The horses are here to be used in case of emergency, in case one of us needs to be taken back. The two horsepeople tug at the reins, barely giving us a glance. This is the signal for us to begin our parikrama.

This is a land of contrasts. The geography is composed of an endless desert of

soil and rock on which the vast lakes of Rakshas Tal and Manasarovar are perched, like birds of paradise. Four rivers – the Sutlej, the Brahmaputra, the Indus, and the Karnali – originate around here. A waterfall of melted ice cascades from an immense height. Deer balance themselves miraculously on the rock face and drink from the waterfall. Lha Chu, the River of the Gods, hums along on shallow stone-beds, guiding us along today's path. We are surrounded by giant black, red, and brown cliffs. Over the ages, the wind and the sun have carved the stone into fantastical ripples. Caves and crevices are etched into the rock. The weathered mountains appear as immense, intricate temples built to honour ancient, shamanistic gods.

We come upon two Bon people. The Bon are the original inhabitants of Tibet. The man and the woman are both small and wear thickly layered clothing. The man walks several paces ahead of the woman, and with each step they prostrate themselves on the ground, their bodies shielded by thick brown aprons and mittens. I hear their murmured prayers. To the Bon people, Kailash is an indestructible crystal mountain at the centre of the world. It is the place of their God, Shenrab. In prostrating themselves, they are worshipping the earth on which they walk. Every stone, every blade of grass, every insect on Kailash is sacred. Chhiring says that the Bon pilgrimage takes three weeks.

The journey around Kailash in itself seems arduous enough to me; to prostrate oneself with each step is an almost fantastical feat of human endurance. The lack of oxygen makes me feel that every movement is delayed by a fraction of a second, as though I am walking through viscous fluid. Everything requires more effort. I cannot grasp how the man and woman are able to fall to the earth and push themselves back up again with every step they take along the icy mountain path.

Their faith humbles me. I question whether I, as an atheist, have the right to be here. If anyone should be here, it is Hari. In India, every Hindu family has a favoured god. For Hari's father's side of the family, it is Shiva. The family name derives from a Shiva temple near their village. The old temple, which lies in an area of barren land, is fed by an underwater spring that flows throughout the year. The spring water falls into a clear bathing pool. Some say Shaivite temple architecture, symbolism, and structure represent Mount Kailash. Devotees ritually wash themselves in the water pools of Shaivite temples before worshipping Shiva in the

main temple. These pools are said to represent Lake Manasarovar.

Hari's family regularly visit their local temple. As a child, he learnt to swim in the bathing pool of the temple. More recently, Hari has begun to read about Shiva in order to explore what the god means to him. Hari thinks of Shiva as the God of Creativity as his destruction enables a flowering of the new. Hari likes the fact that Shiva gives boons to rakshasas, gods, and humans alike; he does not discriminate. His consort, Parvathi, is his equal (another name for her is Shakti or power). Shiva is the oldest of the Hindu gods and some say he bears vestiges of pre-Vedic deities. Hari believes that Shiva means what he says and says what he means.

As my husband grows older, he seems to be circling back to the roots of his ancestral village, and Shiva is a part of this return. Had Hari been able to join me on this trip, I wonder how he would have felt doing the parikrama around Kailash, the greatest temple of the god of his forefathers. If he could have submerged himself in the frigid waters of Lake Manasarovar, would he have remembered the times when he had been a boy, swimming in the cool spring water of the temple pool near his childhood home?

Love Stories

WHEN I WAS A teenager, I used to devour romance novels. Those potboilers, with their predictable protagonists and happily-ever-afters, were my constant companions. As with many of my friends, I had a conservative upbringing (conservative from a western point of view; unconventional from an Indian point of view). This meant that we would identify better with staid British Mills and Boon romances than with racy American Harlequin ones. In the Mills and Boon series, all the heroines were virgins and all the men were devastatingly handsome. Yet, none of these romance novels came close to my favourite love story: the story of Shiva and Sati.

Sati was the beloved daughter of the powerful king Daksha, and the granddaughter of Brahma, the God of Creation. The more she heard of the famed yogi who lived alone in the mountains, the more she fell in love. When it was time for her to marry, she refused every man who came to seek her hand. She wanted only the ascetic god Shiva. King Daksha was beside himself. He felt his exquisite daughter deserved a great god or a powerful king, a man above all men, not the penniless yogi upon whom she had her heart set. But Sati would not relent.

It was a quest of madness. Sati had heard stories about Shiva, but she had never seen him and he had not seen her. Yet, had he seen her, what good would it have done? Her dark, shining skin, her large, luminous eyes, her exquisite beauty and graceful charm would mean nothing to the ascetic who had renounced all worldly pleasures. The impossible task at hand was not to win her father's approval but to

win over Shiva. Sati needed to counter iron with iron, to match her will against his.

Sati, too, became an ascetic. She renounced all luxuries and left behind her palace, family, and friends. The princess became a forest dweller. All day long, the beautiful Sati prayed under the blazing sun, in harsh winds, pouring rain, and freezing cold. Her fasts increased in severity until she became Aparna, the one who lives on one leaf a day.

At long last, Shiva came to hear of Sati's severe practices. He was impressed. When he appeared before her, he saw her emaciated body, her weathered face, her tangled hair, and her worn robes, and he fell in love. Shiva consented to marry Sati, and despite Daksha's disapproval, the couple was wed. For a while, they lived in the happiness of being together. They made their home in a cave in the heights of Kailash, as beautiful as heaven itself.

One day, Sati learned that her sister was planning to attend a yagna, or a religious ceremony. Yagnas were grand affairs. Family, friends, and various gods from everywhere would gather around a giant sacrificial fire, and sages would recite chants and pour ghee, grains, and other offerings into the flames. Sati's father was going to host the yagna, and he invited everyone except Sati and Shiva. Sati reasoned that her father must have forgotten to invite them. She decided she would go anyway. And she would take her husband with her.

Shiva knew his father-in-law despised him still. He understood that the invitation hadn't been forgotten, but withheld. Refusing to attend the yagna, Shiva tried to dissuade his wife from going, warning her that nothing good could come of it. But by the same iron will that had led Sati to win earlier, she insisted upon attending. Shiva could not forbid her, as she was his equal, so he ordered that she be accompanied by escorts: his ganas, an army of fearsome ghouls, ghosts, and monsters of every kind.

When Sati reached the site of her father's yagna, the sacrificial fire was already burning and the guests were congregated around it. Happy to be home, Sati was delighted to see her family. When he saw his daughter, Daksha went mad with anger. How dare she come here? He demanded to know how the wife of a penniless mendicant could think herself worthy of attending a royal yagna. Before his guests, the king launched into a tirade, berating his son-in-law and calling him by terrible names.

Sati stood frozen with shock. Overcome with rage and humiliation, and unable to bear another second, Sati jumped into the sacrificial fire. The gods and people, her family and friends, and the ganas all watched in horror as Sati burnt herself to death.

When the news reached Shiva on Kailash, his wrath knew no limits. His fury shook the earth and made the sky shudder. He unleashed his army of ghouls upon the kings and gods at the yagna. Shiva's army went on a rampage, killing the guests in a fountain of blood as they tried to flee. King Daksha's head was torn from his body and flung into the fire.

When Shiva reached the yagna's ceremonial grounds, he was greeted only by death and destruction. Once his anger cooled, Shiva brought everyone back to life, but he could do nothing to save his beloved wife. He pulled her corpse from the ashes. Blinded by madness and despair, he wandered the earth for years, carrying her burned body in his arms. No one dared to stop him. The earth was unable to bear the heat of his anger and the weight of his wandering. Finally, Vishnu flung his discus to the earth and the sharp blade cut the body of Sati into pieces. Each piece fell to the earth and landed in a different place.

Now that the body of his wife was gone, Shiva recovered his senses. He vowed never to look at another woman. He returned to Mount Kailash and began to immerse himself in deep meditations and yogic austerities of fearsome severity.

I had, on occasion, heard this story from my grandmother, though she preferred to recount the more light-hearted stories of the playful, blue-skinned god, Krishna. Sometimes I read a version of the story of Sati and Shiva in the wildly popular Amar Chitra Katha comic books.

When the Amar Chitra Kathas came out, they unleashed a small revolution in Indian reading habits. In a feat of inspiration, the Amar Chitra Katha company transcribed the action-packed myths of India into printed comics, bringing them to life with blazing colour graphics in which the gods spoke in conversational speech bubbles. Children all over India could now navigate stories from ancient Puranic texts and classical Sanskrit drama, giving rise to hours of delighted reading.

The Amar Chitra Katha comic books imprinted an important element of our cultural and religious heritage upon the collective consciousness of generations. The comics are often, perhaps rightly, criticised for imposing a sanitised,

homogenised, and sometimes infantilised interpretation of these complex stories of passion and pain that delve deep into human nature. They have also recently been denounced for their clear racist overtones; the asuras, primarily villains, are all dark-skinned. Regardless, as a child, I loved reading those homegrown comics. My favourite of these was the one about the beautiful and terrible story of Shiva and Sati.

What unfolded between Shiva and Sati is the ultimate love story. This, I was certain, was how a man should love a woman, and how a woman should love a man: with joyous, mad, consuming desperation. How could any romance novel match it?

The story of Shiva and Sati does not end with the death of Sati. Remaining true to his word, Shiva shut himself off for many years, refusing to look at any other woman. In the meantime, Sati became reincarnated as Parvathi, the daughter of the Himalaya mountains. Like Sati, she too fell in love with the stories of Shiva. She, too, won him over with her severe penances and devotion. This time around, her father, the Lord of the Mountains, was delighted with her choice. He gave the couple his blessings. Shiva and Parvathi went to live in Kailash, and that is where they are said to live to this day.

There is the Kailash of the story and the Kailash made of rock. The mountain stands here in front of me. I can see it. I can photograph it. I squint into the distance, trying to imagine a man and a woman living there, on that harsh, icy mountaintop. Of course, I see nothing but rock and snow. I cannot see the cave that they are said to live in, nor the trees, flowers, and forests that are said to grow around it. I cannot see Parvathi bathing in the emerald lake, or Shiva walking barefoot with a crescent moon in his hair. I picture Shiva deep in meditation, with Parvathi seated next to him. They are in a cave with orange mountain flowers and jasmine. Parvathi has woven them into a bracelet and their scent fills the air.

Pilgrims

To Drira Phuk, Mount Kailash, Tibet

WE STOP AT A large tent. Inside, it is warm, and lined with long tables, benches, and chairs. The tent resounds with the boom of chattering voices. Nyima and a couple of others sit around an enormous stove near the entrance. After the cold vastness of these mountains, the liveliness and warmth of human gathering makes the giant, ramshackle tent feel as cosy as a street-side cafe. Seated on the rows of wooden benches, tourists and locals drink hot tea. Jeff is drinking from a curiously English-styled teacup with a gold rim and red flower designs. We chuckle as he imitates an old Victorian lady with a tight smile, little finger stuck out, taking tiny sips from his dainty cup.

All too soon, it is time to leave. On my way out, I pause to warm my hands at the stove. Chhiring is seated there and advises me to not linger, as the stove sucks the already thin oxygen from around it. I stroke my cheeks to transfer the warmth before reluctantly backing away and stepping out into the icy mountain air.

As Pallu, Katy, Ying, and I set out again, the warm mood of the tent stays with us. Chhiring takes photographs and we strike funny poses. Laughing, we break into a small jig. Chhiring's dance is the funniest, so we declare him the winner.

Is it just an illusion or have hours passed? The sun seems to have moved closer to the earth. It beats down upon us. Hot and cold, hot and cold, it seems to change with every hour. The hot sun feels stifling in the extreme cold wind and vast open spaces. How long have we been walking? Two hours or three? Or only a few

minutes? The simple act of walking is a chore. Nevertheless, I keep placing one foot in front of the other, stabbing my trekking pole into the ground, pushing onward until my steps take on a rhythm.

Soon, there will be no need to walk around this mountain. I see signs of a road being built: earth-moving machines grating on rocky earth, and men in hard hats controlling the machines. A few years from now, this journey of two and a half days will take only a few hours. It seems self-defeating. To the pilgrim, the arduousness of the journey is the point, and faith is fortified by obstacles. Kailash is an embodiment of longing; to reduce the Kailash journey to a drive along a mountain road is to diminish the meaning of the pilgrimage.

Across the last decade, as the visitors to these places have grown in number, so has the waste they leave behind. Travellers report that plastic bags, human refuse, paper, broken glass, and torn clothes line the roads and litter the shores of Lake Manasarovar. Oddly but fortunately, our group has seen none of this. Throughout our journey, the lake and the mountain have been remarkably pristine. Perhaps it is because we are at the tail end of the trekking season and there are hardly any travellers left. Or perhaps the elements have carried away the debris of the travellers who have been here before us.

The irony is that by coming to these sacred places, I, too, have become a part of this sea of despoilers. My waste will lie here for hundreds of years. My money makes the locals, like the nomads at our Tumkot campsite, more prosperous but less content. It's plain to see why the Chinese are building the road: to make it easier for more people like me to come here. I imagine this place a decade from now. Perhaps cars will zip through it with blaring loud music. I imagine trash bins overflowing, exhaust fumes rising into the cold mountain air, and momo stalls and video game parlours lining the rest stops. The juggernaut of development seems unstoppable.

What must the Tibetans make of this? Are they glad for the influx of income from these hordes of travellers? Are local pilgrims relieved that the journey is made easier by the road and the shops? Or do they see this as yet another violation of their sacred spaces and of themselves? If they have objections, what recourse do they have?

I have become numb to the terrible and stark allure of the mountains. If I do not feel the wonder of this journey, why am I here? Walking has become an unpleasant

chore, and an indefinable, dull worry lingers at the back of my mind. Pallu walks beside me in silence, keeping her head down, digging her poles into the ground. A small bird pecks on the ground at the river and an eagle circles close above.

It feels like years since our plane landed on the tiny Simikot airstrip and we began our journey across Humla. After the first day of trekking in Simikot, our confidence was shattered and we were desperate to go back home. But we walked the next day, and the next, until our bodies realised that no matter how vehemently our muscles protested, they could go on. Our bodies deceive us: they can withstand much more than they would have us believe. We can override our aches and pains to take yet another step, and another, until the destination is reached. The trek through Humla has made the parikrama around Kailash easier.

Already the parikrama seems to be part of an entirely separate journey. The last days of our Humla trek were spent walking through barren land, but this landscape is drier still. In Humla, the mountains enclosed me; here, they lift me up and I feel closer to the sky than to the earth. Humla, too, was a trek through the mountains, but this is different because, believer or not, there is no mistaking that this walk around Kailash is a pilgrimage.

Centuries before, the paths to Kailash were uncharted. In those days, pilgrims would have faced astonishing odds, battling accidents, disease, bandits, hostile tribes and more. And they would have had to make this trek without maps or modern medicines. When a pilgrim said goodbye, neither he nor his family would have known if he would ever return.

I cannot believe that it was only faith that drove some of the pilgrims. At a time when travel was not a leisure activity, and adventure travel was unheard of, perhaps the pilgrimage provided a socially acceptable excuse for intrepid explorers and adventurers to venture out into a world beyond their wildest imaginings.

For hundreds of years, this journey has been a labour of the body for the faithful. My fellow travellers include not only Pallu and the others in my group, but all those who are here in Kailash now, those who have come here before us and those who will come after us. Together in our thoughts, hopes, and faiths, we walk this path. We are separated only by time. For all of us, the mountain is always on our side, urging us on, promising that the journey's end lies just around the corner.

Kailash at Night

Drira Phuk, Mount Kailash, Tibet
Altitude ~ 5,200 metres

IT IS NOT YET evening when we reach the first campsite. Across the valley, half hidden behind huge rocks, is the Drira Phuk (Yak-Horn Cave) Monastery. Like most places in Tibet, the Yak-Horn Cave has a story to tell.

One day, a monk saw a female yak that seemed somehow different from the others. Intrigued, he followed it. When the animal went into a cave, it disappeared, leaving behind only an imprint of its horns. The monk realised the yak was a dakhini (divine female being) in disguise. She had led him into the cave for a reason. The monk began to meditate in the cave and the dakhini became his protector. Over the years, the cave attracted many more monks. Eventually, the Drira Phuk Monastery was built to house these monks, and to commemorate the dakhini of the Yak-Horn Cave. As I look out from the campsite, the buildings of the once-rich and important Drira Phuk Monastery appear modest. I have no desire to visit the monastery. I want to stay at the foot of Kailash.

The symmetrical black and white monolith feels alien, yet as familiar as an old dream. Chhiring tells us this is as close as we will get to Kailash and that this view of the mountain is the most beautiful we will see.

The crew is putting up tents, and Jeff and Sperello are already heading up the slope. They're hoping to get a closer view of Kailash. The rest of us huddle around the fire Chirring has built. The sun is still bright. When Katy suggests we go up,

Pallu and I put our gloves back on and follow her. Ying and Prarthana stay hunched near the fire.

The three of us follow a path along a small, trickling stream. The melted snow of Kailash flows through our campsite. We stop and drink from the stream. The water is cold and sweet. With each step, my tiredness fades.

As if by unspoken agreement, the three of us each find a rock and sit in silence. I close my eyes and listen to the fierce roar of the wind. At my feet, the stream murmurs as it runs over mossy rocks. While I remain as still as the rock beneath me, I feel like a little child, barely able to restrain myself from jumping up and running around in elation. I feel a deep connection with the other two women, though we are sitting apart, immersed in our own ways of silence.

Amidst the cold wind and the moving clouds, a hush pervades the moment. I am filled with the silence in all things: the mountain, the flowing water, the iridescent snow, the cold pure air, the blue sky. There is a hymn for the god Rudra, an ancient form of Shiva, that celebrates the presence of the god in the world and in nature. Snippets of the hymn remind me of the peace of the moment.

Salutations to the one (Rudra),
Who lives in holy waters and on every shore,
Who is in the deepest lakes and in every drop of dew,
Who pervades the atoms and who lives in the dust.
Salutations to him,
Who is in the white clouds of autumn,
And who is in the heat of the sun.
Salutations to him:
Who is tender grass and foam,
Who is sand and water,
And sound and echo.

Unnamed poets composed these verses hundreds of years ago. They lived, immersed in nature. As they tilled the land or hunted for food or lay looking at the sky, they must have felt moments of stillness. Feeling the immensity of the world around them and the minuteness of their existence, they must have sensed the futility and pathos of this world of striving. Faced with the terrible, mysterious

beauty of their world, would they have felt helpless or joyful? Peaceful or afraid? From these verses, it seems to me that they felt all these things, that they sensed the divine in nature.

We are back at the camp before dark. A little while later, the tall figure of Sperello descends down the path.

'Where's Jeff?' Chhiring asks.

'He should be down soon,' Sperello says, his face pensive. 'Something happened to Jeff in the mountain.'

When Sperello started up the slope, Jeff had already set out. With each step, Jeff felt that he was moving forward but the mountain was not getting any closer. Another step, Jeff told himself, one more step. But it was no use; the mountain seemed as distant as it had always been. At one point, Jeff stopped; he could not walk any further. As he gazed at the colossus of rock before him, he was shaken by a feeling that the mountain was rising from below, as if it were moving, growing from the earth to the sky. An inexplicable emotion coursed through his body, moving him so profoundly that he fell to his knees. Sperello, who was taking photos in the vicinity, asked if everything was all right. But Jeff could not speak. Still kneeling, he shook Sperello's hands.

'I will never forget it,' Jeff tells us later. He can't seem to explain what happened to him at that moment.

On his travels, Jeff is always an observer. He is a photographer, a chronicler of journeys, and a consumer of other cultures and geographies. But that day on the mountain, everything changed. The lens was forgotten. The need to observe and the process of thought vanished. Jeff was no longer an eye, watching and noting; he was being and doing and feeling. The same man who, a few days ago, had found it odd and eccentric that Mariene could meditate on the river bank had been overcome by an immensity of emotion that had brought him to his knees. He had been felled by a deeply spiritual experience that belonged only to him, and to the mountain.

The experience altered Jeff's understanding of the world and of himself. The effect this vision had on him and the questions it raised for him were a profound kind of truth. Since ancient times, mystics of all religions have strived to reconcile their spiritual experiences with the parametres of the physical and material world.

Many have come to understand that while reality and truth are not always the same, they do not necessarily oppose or preclude one another. The myths of Shiva, the lake and the mountain, Buddhist stories and visualisations, the feeling of a mountain rising: none of these need be literal in order to be considered truthful. Such moments simply point to a truth as complex as the people who seek to understand them.

Tonight's dinner is served in our tents. Chhiring tells us we need to sleep early, as tomorrow we must rise very early to begin our climb up the long, steep heights to Dolma La pass. Zipped into my sleeping bag, I close my eyes and try to relax. I count sheep, then yaks. But sleep ebbs away. Perhaps I am excited at having made it this far or I am nervous at the idea of climbing up to Dolma La. I keep remembering the story of the man who was ripped to shreds by dogs; the woman who died in the toilet tent; the yogi who had collapsed near the Dolma La pass. In the end, nothing could save the yogi – not the asanas, not the prayanam, nor the meditation.

I scramble out of my tent. Everyone is asleep. The yaks and horses flick their tails in the dust and a scattering of menacing, hungry dogs lie watching. We are all gathered here, this motley company of animals and humans, under a mountain made incandescent by a sky filled with starlight.

Blue Lights

Drira Phuk, Mount Kailash, Tibet
Altitude ~ 5,200 metres

A VOICE RINGS OUT, 'Good morning!'

I groan and bury my face in the warmth of my sleeping bag.

'Wake up, ladies!' Chhiring's call is louder.

It takes me a second to remember that I am in the first camp at Kailash and that today is the day we are to climb the Dolma La pass. I sit up and open my eyes. In that instant, I see a shower of blue lights. They are all around me: blue flashes, moving at great speeds. Some emanate from under me, some appear in front, and after a wild dance, like zipping electrons, the blue lights converge towards me. I blink a few times to clear my vision. There it is again, a shower of blue lights. I am still in my tent – where are the lights coming from?

The lights flash like small, silent firecrackers – sparkling, dancing, and, as they get close to me, they fade. Clear, sharp, beautiful: these words spring to mind. The lights are the colour of a sky changing from afternoon to early evening and they are bright as sapphires. Shock and disbelief give way to amazement. I ease myself into the moment. The blue lights wash over me, bathing me in their luminosity.

Soon, the lights slow down. The blue fades, the sharpness blurs. The lights diffuse into larger white orbs, and then at last they dim too. In an instant, they are gone. I shake my head to make sure the lights are truly gone. Everything is back to normal. The whole experience has taken no more than ten seconds.

'Did you see that?' I turn to Pallu, but she is still asleep.

I find my toothbrush and soap in my bag and shake my cousin awake.

Outside, it is bitterly cold, though the sun has already risen. On the mountain, clouds hover for one moment and are blown away a second later. The five yaks are being readied for departure, and the dark fur of the horned beasts is striking against the white of the surrounding snow. Sperello tilts his camera, taking photographs of the south face of Kailash as the light of the morning sun makes the mountain top glow orange. The morning light throws itself against the mountain's protrusions and indentations, making strange shapes of light and shadow. The play of light accentuates the contrast of the long horizontal lines of rock and snow that cover the lower slopes.

These lines are the scars of Ravana, the man who poisoned the waters of Rakshas Tal. Ravana, the villain of the great Indian epic, the Ramayana, was also one of Shiva's greatest devotees. It was Shiva's various indulgences towards the errant Ravana that made my aunt, while watching a mythological movie, exclaim over the god's indiscriminate boon giving.

In the myths, Ravana was the King of Lanka, what is now Sri Lanka. He begged Shiva to move to his southern kingdom so Ravana could pray to his favourite god whenever he liked. Shiva refused; he would not leave Mount Kailash. So Ravana decided to move the mountain itself. The King of Lanka trussed powerful ropes around Kailash and, with his hands, began to lift the weight of the mountain. Kailash quivered as it inched upwards, off the earth. Shiva realised what was happening. Smiling – after all, Ravana was his favoured devotee – Shiva pressed down with his little toe. Just the weight of his toe was enough to make Kailash fall, trapping Ravana beneath the rock. Crushed underneath the mountain, Ravana came to his senses. He realised how absurdly egotistical he had been to believe that he could move a god. He understood, too, the power and compassion of Shiva, who could have killed him in an instant but chose to be lenient so his devotee could learn the value of humility.

Under the mountain, Ravana spontaneously composed and sang the 'Shivatandavastotram' – a poetic outburst in praise of Shiva, the dancer. In this powerful, rhythmic composition, with its incantations mirroring the beats of Shiva's drum, Ravana sang of Shiva bearing the weight of the universe. In rapturous verses,

Ravana extolled Shiva's beauty. He sang of the moon in Shiva's hair, his dark neck adorned by snakes, and his matted locks made lovely with the waves of the River Ganga. Ravana proclaimed that to truly worship Shiva was to look upon snake and garland, jewel and dirt, emperor and common man with utter equanimity.

Pleased with Ravana's song, Shiva released the King of Lanka from underneath Kailash. The loosened ropes fell, but they left their mark on the mountain. That icy morning, under the risen sun, I saw the mythical marks of Ravana's bonds as he tried to lift a mountain for his God.

Every face of Kailash bears the scars of ancient myths. The iconic image of Kailash is the north face, which has a deep crevice running all the way from its peak to its midsection. At Rakshas Tal and Chiu Gompa, I had seen this view, in which Kailash looks like a pyramid with a ladder carved into it. To Tibetan Buddhists and the Bon people, the crevice is the mark of the drum of Bon Chung in the story of Milarepa.

Milarepa was a Buddhist monk and saint who lived in the 11th or 12th century. He was challenged by Bon Chung, a saint and powerful magician of the Bon religion, to a series of contests to determine who was more powerful. The final challenge was to climb Kailash, and the first one to reach the peak would be declared the winner.

Bon Chung rose early in the morning. Setting out with his drum, he began to climb the mountain. Meanwhile, Milarepa slept in. As the sun rose higher in the sky, Bon Chung rose higher on Kailash. Milarepa's followers began to grow anxious. At this rate, the Bon magician would reach the peak in a few hours. They pleaded with their master to start climbing, but Milarepa just yawned and went back to sleep. More time went by and Bon Chung was nearing the peak. Milarepa's followers were now desperate. Their master still refused to stir. Just before Bon Chung reached the peak, Milarepa finally woke up. It was time, he said, and sprang into action. In an instant, Milarepa was transported by light to the top of the mountain, reaching it just moments before Bon Chung. In his shock, Bon Chung fell and tumbled down the slopes of Kailash. His drum rolled down after him, carving out the ridge that marks the north face of the mountain. Having defeated Bon Chung, Milarepa claimed Kailash for Buddhism. The Bon people were allocated another mountain to the east.

Swathed in mythology, Kailash is more than a mountain. Across centuries, the physical mountain has become fused with its mystical counterpart – Mount Meru. According to Hindus and Buddhists, Meru is a mountain of crystal light at the centre of the spiritual universe. Meru has a bodily presence also. In yogic texts, the spine is referred to as Meru Danda (the staff of Meru). My Buddhist meditation teacher says that in meditation practice, Meru can be envisioned as a cylinder of pure light-energy running parallel to the spine, just in front of it. Through meditation we can uncover this mountain of crystal light, and its energy will lift us to a higher consciousness.

'When you close your eyes,' she tells me, 'imagine this light.' I like this idea. I like to think that this mountain we see, photograph, and marvel at is something within us. We carry it in our bodies. Though we cannot climb the Kailash of rock and stone, we can climb the Meru of light. I wonder which of these is the more difficult journey.

In the early morning sunlight the mountain looks beautiful, but I don't stay long. I am already running late, and Chhiring says we need to leave earlier than usual. This is the most dangerous part of the trip and he's anxious for us to cross the heights of the Dolma La pass before noon. After that, there's an increased chance of wind or rain, which would render it almost impossible. If we can make it safely over the pass, we are likely to finish the parikrama. Then, we will walk through lower, safer altitudes.

'Let's just get on a pony if it gets too difficult. There is zero need to try to climb it if it gets too difficult'. Pallu zips up her bag in our tent.

'Yeah,' I say, 'but there's just one problem.'

'What?'

'Chhiring told us if it gets slippery, the ponies can lose traction. They may slip, and fall off the edge.'

'Oh, man.'

'Yeah.'

'What to do?' Pallu says. 'I guess we'll just have to get going. Everyone else must already be off.'

'You go. I'm coming,' I tell her.

I am still packing my bag. I cannot understand why it is taking such a long time

this morning. Maybe it's the bitter cold. It might be due to the lack of sleep last night, or that I'm having trouble concentrating because I keep thinking about my experience with the lights.

I haven't told anyone about the lights. I do not know what to make of them. Were those blue lights the residue of a dream? It didn't feel like a dream. The whole experience had the feeling of crispness, as if I were at my most awake and attentive.

Blue lights appear in a Tibetan text called Bardo Thos Grol (Liberation by Hearing During the Gaps). In America, Bardo Thos Grol gained fame as 'The Tibetan Book of the Dead' in the 1960s. The book was used as a psychedelic drug manual, but in tone and intent, Bardo Thos Grol is far from hippie culture. A Nyigma text of some importance, the book deals with death and the path to liberation from the cycle of rebirth. A terma (hidden text), the Bardo Thos Grol is believed to have been written by Padmasambhava in the 8th century and then hidden, until humanity was ready to receive it. Six hundred years afterwards, a young Buddhist teacher named Karma Lingpa found it in a pile of rocks – just as it had been prophesied centuries ago.

The Bardo Thos Grol talks about six states of consciousness. While we are alive, we experience the bardos (gaps) of living, dreaming, and the meditative state. Tibetans believe that after we die, our consciousness wanders in an intermediate state between death and rebirth. The text is used to guide the consciousness through these stages of death.

Traditionally, the text is read aloud to the dying person. The reading begins just before death, when the process of dying begins to take place. It continues throughout the stages of death, and ends at the moment of rebirth. All of this takes forty-nine days, and the text is read to the dying person for the entire duration.

There are three bardos of death: the bardo at the time of death; the bardo after death (while experiencing reality); and the bardo of rebirth. During the second bardo of death – the Chon Yid bardo – the consciousness encounters lights and visions that are, by turn, wonderful and terrifying.

In the first vision of the Chon Yid bardo, space arises as blue light emanating from the white-coloured Buddha Vairochana. The blue luminosity is radiant, dazzling, clear. It shines with an awesome brilliance and the person seeing it will want to flee with terror. The book exhorts the listener not to run away, but instead

to face the blue light with the understanding that it is reality perceived in its purest form. The book tells us that all visions manifested in the bardos are manifestations of the mind – projections and illusions to confuse the consciousness.

Were my blue lights a hallucination? A few years ago, I suffered from migraines that would sometimes cause light disturbances. Black or white dots would wander before my eyes like tiny eye-flies. I decide the blue lights are either a residue of a dream state or a migraine-like light disturbance, altered in the heights of the thin mountain air.

There's always been a small and irrational part of me that wants to believe in beautiful stories. The stories from my childhood are the ones I love most, so I find myself searching for connections between the blue lights and the god of Kailash. Perhaps the lights were blue because Shiva is Neelakantha – the one with a blue throat. Perhaps the lights danced before me because Shiva is the lord of dance. I saw the lights at the feet of Mount Kailash, the abode of Shiva. Maybe the blue lights are a good omen, like the mala Pallu found in Lake Manasarovar, and the lights Prarthana and I saw on the lake.

This morning, in the shadow of the mountain of myths, anything seems possible.

Walking in Clouds

EVERYONE IS GONE, EVERYONE has left. I need to hurry. The campsite has been packed up. I need to leave, but I can't get my shoes tied. My shoes refuse to let me tie them. Tie themselves. I cannot tie my shoes. The yaks are gone, and the horses. I am alone.

I sit on a rock. Looming before me, Mount Kailash eclipses the sky, the empty campsite at its foot. I am bent over, struggling to tie the laces, which are crawling like snakes through my fingers. Perhaps it is my gloves that are making me clumsy. I take off my gloves, but my fingers grow instantly numb with cold. I put my gloves back on. I sit up, take a deep breath, and try once more. Finally, I have managed to fashion some kind of knot. Behind me, I hear horses. I see one of Chhiring's assistants, a small, thin man, hovering. Good. I am not alone.

I stand up. I must catch up with everyone. I want to reach Dolma La pass with the others. I want to tell the assistant to rush. Why is he moving so slowly? I stumble over small stones and the assistant takes my hand to steady me. I slow down. I take another ten steps. Suddenly, I feel completely drained.

Not to worry. There is nothing to worry about. Lack of sleep is all it is. I have not been able to sleep at night. I whisper to myself that I just need a few seconds. I lean against a rock. The assistant says something I cannot understand.

'I just need a minute,' I say, though I know he cannot understand me either.

I resume walking. After taking three steps, I'm overcome by dizziness. The world seems to gently rock. It will pass, I resolve. I focus on my breath and try to drag each

breath in and out with each step. Left foot, then right. My vision begins to curdle. One breath after the other, but the world is blurring. It turns as hazy and soft as cotton. I put one foot before the other. I am walking in clouds.

'I need to sit,' I tell the assistant. Focus, focus. Breathe in and out. The assistant seems to understand the gist of what I'm saying. He helps me to a rock. I lumber down on to it and I can feel the world falling. There are sounds of horses and wind and voices. Whose voices? I can see about six feet in front of me and, beyond that, shapes blurring into each other. The earth begins to swirl. Still, I can see bright colours. The assistant's jacket is a blur of bright blue. The rock I am on is a black cloud. In the distance, a red object moves slowly closer. It is the red of robins, a hue that has no place in these brown, snowy landscapes. But I remember that red – it is the red of Pallu's jacket. I do not dare to hope, but can it be her?

'Pallu, Pallu!' I shout.

'Hey, Kavi! I thought you had gone!' Her voice sounds as if it is coming from far away.

'Pallu! Call Chhiring!' I shout again.

'What?'

'Call Chhiring! Something is wrong. Call Chhiring!' I shout.

I turn to the assistant with the blue jacket. 'Chhiring, call Chhiring!' Those are all the words I can manage. I hope he will understand. I sit on the rock, still trying to find my breath, staring into nothing. I can now see only two feet in front of me. Be clear. Keep awake. Focus. Focus.

I hear Chhiring's voice. Suddenly, his face is close to mine and I am standing. When did I stand? I cannot remember getting off the rock. Chhiring peers into my eyes. I can see his pupils, just as he can see mine. He pulls down my lower lids. He peers at my cheeks, carefully pressing them.

Stop looking at my cheeks, I want to shout, do something!

He takes off my gloves and carefully examines my fingers, one by one. It is like an old-world courtesy, the way he holds my fingers. What's happening to me? Am I going to die? Have I spoken the words aloud? No one seems to have heard, and I am relieved. Don't be ridiculous. Stop being a drama queen. Just breathe slowly. The white cloud slowly envelops me, like a soft embrace. My vision is diminishing.

'Chhiring, what do we do?' I ask.

'You go back down. That is best.' Chhiring is nodding. He looks stern – no, serious. He looks serious.

'Down where? Back?'

'Yes. Go back down!'

What does he mean? Does he know what he's saying? If I go back, I won't finish the parikrama. I won't go to Dolma La pass with the others.

'Can we wait? Maybe we can wait and see.' I want to assure Chhiring that I can finish the trek. I am fit enough, young enough, determined enough.

Chhiring shakes his head.

I want to tell him it will be fine. You see, I want to explain, I am destined to finish the parikrama – we were called for this journey. And the mala, the light on the lake, the dancing blue lights of Shiva. Can these be anything other than signs? I will finish the parikrama because I am meant to finish it. The thought is so nebulous that it disappears before I can voice it.

'You go back down,' Chhiring insists. His voice seems to come from far away. I cannot stand up, and I have to concentrate, and force myself to stay awake.

There are hands. Hands are steadying me. Many hands, maybe countless hands, are lifting me. They are putting me on a saddle. Hands are righting me whenever I slide. Where have all of these hands come from? Hands hold me tightly as the horse begins to move. I hear hooves on stone and I sway with the horse. *Breathe, breathe,* I tell myself.

I am going back down the slope. I will not be with the others. They will be going up to Dolma La pass and I will be going back down. Concentrate, focus, stay awake. I grip my horse and put my cheek on its mane. Breathe, breathe, in and out.

'Kavi!' It sounds like Pallu's voice, but it can't be. I must be dreaming. 'Kavi, how are you feeling?' It cannot be her.

'Pallu?'

'Yes. How are you feeling?'

What is she doing here? She should be on the mountain. She should be on her way to Dolma La pass.

'Pallu, what are you doing?' She should be on her way to finish what we started. This was why she has come here, finishing is the whole point of her trip. 'Why are you here?' I try to make my voice stern, but it sounds strange and disembodied.

There is a lag between when I say the words and when I hear them, as if I am lip-synching. Do I sound that way to her?

'I am staying with you,' she says.

'No. Go back,' I tell her. How can I make her understand the magnitude of disappointment and guilt I will feel if she does not finish the trek because of me?

'Pallu, finish the trek.'

'I am not leaving you alone,' she says.

'Please. Go.'

'I'm not leaving you alone.'

I want to tell her that at least one of us has to finish the journey. It will be a shared victory. But I feel winded from all the talking. Focus. Breathe. I need to focus. I need to stay conscious.

Within half an hour, I can sit up. I don't need my horse-lady to hold on to me. The sound of hooves on loose stones, the warm sun, and the animal smell of the horses make the world seem solid again. We pause as the horses bend to drink from a shallow stream.

'How are you feeling?' Pallu asks.

'Better. Stronger.' I can see clearly. There is no longer a delay between speaking and hearing myself speak. 'Go back. You can go back to Chhiring.'

'I'm not leaving you.'

'Leave me. Leave me. I'm fine. Finish the trek!'

'No way.' Pallu shakes her head. Her horse whinnies.

'Maybe we can both go back.' It seems like a great idea.

'Are you crazy?'

'I feel better now. We can finish together.'

'No.'

Nyima accompanies us. He walks beside me and frequently checks my pulse. Before long, we find ourselves back in Lha Chu Valley. We walk beside the river, under the cliffs that had struck me as strange temples. The man leading Pallu's horse switches on a small music player strapped around his waist. Tibetan chants fill the air. The slow rhythm merges with our steps, and the drawn-out voice sounds strange and beautiful. Pallu sits uneasily on her horse, the hood of her red jacket almost covering her face.

Our horses tread on loose stones, noses pointing down. A smiling woman with curly yellow hair greets us by waving her trekking pole. Behind us a jaunty group of German trekkers laughs and chats. I avoid looking at them, feeling slightly ashamed of having fallen ill on a journey that even the aged complete.

Nyima tells us that Chhiring was very worried. He informs me that I have high-altitude cerebral oedema (HACE), a dangerous and often fatal form of altitude sickness. The brain fills with fluid and loses oxygen, causing sleeplessness, hallucinations, and disorientation. I'd displayed all of its symptoms: my pulse had weakened, my face was turning blue, and my pupils were dilated. I had been sleepless the night before. I had seen blue lights. I could not tie my shoelaces this morning because I was disoriented. With HACE, judgement is impaired, so I did not recognise the signs of danger, nor did I accept the fact that I was in danger. The only hope for surviving HACE is immediate descent.

The sun is shining brightly in Darpoche. This is where we started our Kora.

'One last look,' I tell Pallu. I turn to soak in the sight of the mountain. I have a wild idea to run back and finish the journey. Of course, that is impossible.

'So close,' Pallu says. The mountain is so close. We were so close to finishing our parikrama. It does not matter which of these she means, because both are true.

In the ancient verses to Rudra, the poets wrote:

Salutations to him,
Who lives in marshy, muddy places,
And who lives in clear pools.
In thorny, difficult places,
In forest creepers.
Salutations to him,
Who is born in this world,
Who is mixed with good things and bad things,
And things that change.

Rudra is the god of this world. He lives not on some celestial plane but in cremation grounds and waters and dust and forest creepers, and on a beautiful, dangerous mountain of ice and rock. The verses point to the realisation that whether mud and marsh, or the pure water of clear pools, both have an equal right

to be. My one night on Kailash and my aborted parikrama form part of the same journey. When I meditate, sometimes I feel joyful and serene, and at other times fear and pain arise. One of the skills developed during meditation is the ability to accept both that joy and that pain.

The great Zen master Dogen had said: 'A flower falls even though we love it; a weed grows even though we do not love it.'

Within the time and space of my meditation practice, this insight is clear to me; however, outside my practice, I often lose sight of this understanding.

As I get off the horse, the horsewoman's indifferent eyes rest briefly on me.

I smile and say, 'Thank you, thank you!'

I want to tell her that I am deeply grateful to her and her horse, but she looks away. I had imagined that our shared experience had woven a bond between us, but perhaps it has meant nothing to her. The dramas of my life are of no consequence to her, as she has seen it all before. While I had been fighting to stay conscious, what had she been thinking of? Maybe she was cross at the thought of the dinner she would have to cook at home when she returned. Maybe my early return would cost her a day's wages and tips, and I was an annoying personification of this loss.

Still, I want her to know and I tap her shoulder and say, 'Thank you.' I am not sure whether she understands. She nods and looks away.

Ahead is the Tibetan sky burial that I had seen at the start. It looks the same – carved into the mountain of contradictions, black and white, rock and ice. On this mountain, even death is met with indifference and even death is an offering.

A Stolen Day

Lake Manasarovar, Tibet
Altitude ~ 4,600 metres

WE ARE TO SPEND the night at Darchen, at the guesthouse with the airless rooms and the intolerable toilet. Pallu requests Nyima to find an alternative for us.

'Some other place. Like Manasarovar. Why can't we stay at Manasarovar?' she asks.

'We do not have permission,' he tells her.

'Can you try to get it?' she asks.

Nyima nods but looks unsure. He tells us to call our families from a nearby telephone booth while he negotiates with the authorities.

The telephone booth is manned by a fat, unkempt man with rotting teeth. On the wall hangs a poster of Sneha, the heroine of South Indian movies, depicted in an advertisement for a Telugu jewellery shop. Under the doe-like gaze of Sneha in a *Kanchivaram* sari, decked from head to toe in various types of gold ornaments, I am a little pleased that a small slice of my hometown has permeated into the deepest interiors of Tibet. Pallu points out that the poster probably was discarded by a Telugu pilgrim. Why a pilgrim would bring a jewellery poster along on a pilgrimage, I cannot imagine. In any case, our quest to call our families has been in vain – the phone here does not work.

Yaks carrying the travellers' luggage on Day 1 of the parikrama. *Photo by Ying*

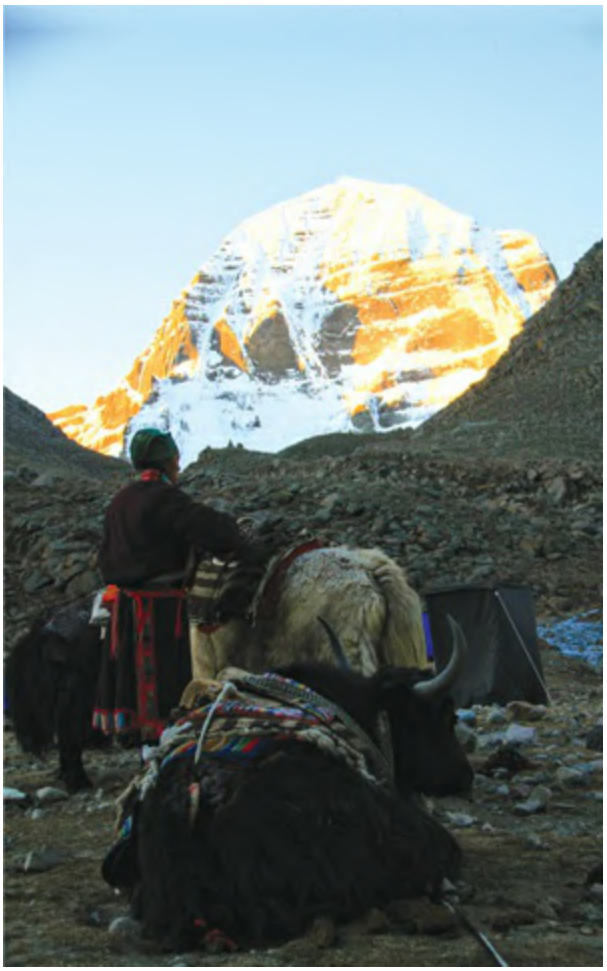
Sperello, Chhiring, and Katy on Day 1 of the parikrama. *Photo by Jeff*

Kavitha on Day 1 of the parikrama. *Photo by Jeff*

Drira Phuk Monastery opposite the campsite at Mount Kailash. *Photo by Jeff*

Soaring in the heights of Mount Kailash.

Evening light falls on Mount Kailash. *Photo by Jeff*



Taking in the brilliance of the mountain. *Photo by Jeff*

Near the campsite at Mount Kailash. *Photo by Sperello*

Mount Kailash as seen from Lake Manasarovar. *Photo by Ying*

Lake Manasarovar, second campsite. *Photo by Ying*

Jeff at Lake Manasarovar, second campsite. *Photo by Sperello*

The melting snow of Mount Kailash. *Photo by Jeff*

Transient and eternal: a sunset at Lake Manasarovar, second campsite. *Photo by Jeff*

When Nyima returns, he looks pleased. He has managed to acquire permits for an extra day at Lake Manasarovar. We thank him profusely, feeling contrition for our earlier hostility towards him. We hop into the jeep with the air of convicts whose prison terms have just been commuted. At every checkpoint throughout our journey, Nyima has to disembark to explain things to the Chinese soldiers. Even this does not dampen our spirits.

It is late afternoon when we arrive at the lake. We are staying at a different campsite this time. Mount Kailash is to our right. An old man, his wife, and their grown son look after the campsite and stay in a small, grey-tented teahouse with a large, ornate wrought-iron stove in one corner. The woman cooks us a meal of rice and spicy stir-fried Chinese cabbage. It is the most delicious meal we have eaten in days. Afterwards, the woman pours me a steaming cup of yak butter tea. Pallu shakes her head. She is willing to try most things, but this is where she draws the line.

The woman is large, with a ready smile. When she is not cooking or cleaning, she makes prayer flags, or chants as she whirls a prayer wheel. Her husband and her son spend much of their time at a large flag post at the edge of the lake. They are getting

the campsite ready for the pilgrims and trekkers who are set to arrive tomorrow, in time for the full moon.

It is still bright outside. Pebbles shine under the light, and white and brown waterfowl perch on the lake. I think of the Fijian-Indian doctor from our previous group. A compact man, he stood firm in his opinions and was worldly and determined. I could detect no signs of religiosity in him, but Chhiring had told me that when the doctor reached the lake, he performed a puja at the lake's edge. He had brought along small puja utensils from home. The doctor had shed his worldly persona, chanted mantras, and prayed to Shiva with unabashed devotion. I can imagine him sitting cross-legged, facing the water, his palms turned upwards, his eyes moving from the lake to the mountain, and back again.

The next morning, the man and the boy are tying something around the flag post that stands at the lake's edge. Nyima tells us not to venture too far by ourselves – the dogs are always watching. His face remains impassive much of the time, but he smiles more often. He is easier around us, and we are easier around him. There are no other visitors here. Pallu and I are alone on the lake shore.

'It was scary,' Pallu says, 'the way you were talking, your eyes. It was so scary.'

It strikes me that I had almost died out there on the freezing paths of Kailash. My thoughts had been overwhelmed by the guilt I felt about Pallu having to turn back, so I failed, until now, to truly grasp how much danger I was in.

I steal a glance at my cousin. She looks relaxed as she peers into the distance. How does she feel? For Pallu, this trip was an important test of perseverance. She needed to see if she could finish what she started so many years ago.

Not only did Pallu give up the parikrama, she took on the responsibility of caring for me. Buddhists say that while generosity is difficult, gratitude is even more so. She has given up her long-held wish and I am uneasy with it. Why? Perhaps because I have always thought that I am invulnerable and I find it hard to accept when I need to be cared for. And how strange that my younger cousin is the one doing this for me. All these years, I had always thought it would be the other way around. I wonder if she knows how remarkable her acts were, she wears them so lightly. How to thank her? We are too close for formal words of thanks. So, I do what I can – I make light of it.

'You are crazy, Pallu. You should have finished.'

'You are the one who is crazy.'

'No, I had altitude sickness. You are crazy,' I tell her.

'Just shut up.' She smiles.

We watch a small duck bobbing on the gentle waves. In Hindu myths, the birds of Manasarovar are creatures of such perfect purity that they can separate milk from water. The lake is a tranquil, luminous sapphire, cradled between mountains. The colours of the sky are mirrored and animated in its rippling waters. After the ferocious beauty of the mountain, the lake is soothing. It is a stretched-out oval of endless, radiant blue. Manasarovar is known as the sun lake, but to me it feels as gentle as the moon; it is a moon lake.

At the water's edge, Pallu and I speak of small, desultory things without time or place in our normal lives. We gossip shamelessly. We talk about all the things we will do and the stories we will tell when we get back home. We take our shoes off and dip our feet into the water. The water is ice cold, yet sun-warmed. We shiver and laugh. This is what we had wanted to do during the trek in Humla, to take our shoes off and feel the soil, the water, the grass. This day feels like it has been stolen from time, and now as we take our shoes off and dip our feet into the lake, we dip it into time itself.

Nyima connects me to Hari, who says he has arranged to have Pallu and me airlifted out. The urgency in my husband's voice seems out of place in the still air.

Nyima soon gets another call. He hands the phone to me.

'Hello?' It is a man's voice with a drawn-out American accent.

'Hi! My name is John and I'm calling from Boston.' He sounds very concerned.

'Hi John. I'm Kavitha.'

'How are you, Kavitha?' he asks.

I picture a big, brown-haired man sitting at the desk in his temperature-controlled room, looking out the window at the cold and fog and traffic and noise and cars. And here I am in one of the most beautiful places in the world; how absurd that he is the one asking me how I am.

'Me? I'm fine,' I say, 'I'm doing great! How are you? How's Boston?'

'Glad to hear you are doing well,' he says. Then he asks some questions about my age, and health, and other details. John says I do not sound sick enough to be airlifted out. After thinking about this for a few seconds, I have to agree.

Later, Hari calls back. 'So, what did the guy from the rescue company say?'

'He said hi and how are you.'

'And what did you say?'

'I said I was doing great.'

'What? What do you mean *great*? You were on the brink of death.'

'But he asked me how I was, so I said I was doing great, because I was doing great at that time.'

'OK. Then what?'

'I asked him how he was.'

There is a short pause. 'I guess he's not sending the helicopter.'

'I guess not.'

'Damn it, Kavi! Why'd you have to say you were fine? You are not fine – just twenty-four hours ago, I thought you wouldn't make it.'

'But I made it.'

'We are all worried here.'

'I'm coming home soon, Hari.'

He tells me he had a dream the morning I fell sick at the campsite in Kailash. He had dreamed he was sitting alone on a bench when he heard footsteps. He turned around and saw me.

'Hey! What are you doing here?' he'd asked me.

I walked across the room and sat down next to him.

'I thought you were in Kailash,' he said. I only smiled. I linked my arm through his and we sat there together.

Hari had woken up feeling startled and uneasy. It was morning and I was far away, in the campsite in Kailash. Perhaps I was drinking coffee. Perhaps I was stuffing my sleeping bag in my backpack. Or maybe, I had just woken, my eyes opening wider as the blue lights danced before me.

Later, Ashok calls. Pallu tells him we are fine, and that there is no need to worry.

'It's just a few more days,' she tells him. 'We're almost home.'

By afternoon, the rest of the group reaches Manasarovar.

Prarthana looks bewildered. 'You guys were right behind me,' she says. 'The next thing I know, Chhiring tells us you had turned back.'

That is true. The entire series of events – my falling ill, Pallu and I mounting the

horses and leaving the campsite – could not have taken more than ten minutes.

'Tell us about Dolma La. Tell us about the rest of the journey,' Pallu says.

The exhilaration of having completed the journey is evident on Prarthana's face, but to make us feel better, she says the best views of Kailash were on the first day, anyway. She says, 'I missed you guys.'

Ying, too, is concerned. How did things go wrong so suddenly, she asks. She says that after I had got sick, Chhiring told her he had not been worried about me. Throughout our trip, he had been the most concerned about Ying.

'But journey is not about ego,' Ying tells me later. 'I don't think it is about competing. If you are not strong enough, so what? It does not matter. If you need help, hire a porter. If you can't walk, ride a pony. If you can't go fast, go slow. It is not about being first or being strong or taking it as a challenge. Do the journey however you can do it. Don't let other people stop you.'

Sperello is relieved to have finished despite the pain in his left heel. He says he will bring his wife Carla here. She may not be able to walk the distances, but he will get her a pony. He wants her to see the mountain any way possible.

Katy is grateful that she was unaware of how unfit and inexperienced Pallu and I were, and about Ying's bad leg. If she had known, she says, she would have cancelled the trip and she would have missed out on something precious to her.

Jeff hands Pallu and me a stone each. 'I got them from Dolma La pass.'

'Thanks, Jeff!' Pallu says.

I stroke the white polished stone and put away the piece of Dolma La in my pocket.

Mariene and Stephan arrive at the campsite. They have heard about what happened.

'I was doing fine,' I say, 'and then I was not. I still don't understand it.'

'Don't worry, it happens to experienced trekkers also,' Mariene says. She tells us that when she and Stephan set out to climb Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania, they had been trekking all over the world for years. Yet, when they were almost at the peak of Kilimanjaro, Stephan had a mild heart attack.

'Oh no! What did you do?' I ask.

What could she do? She left him with the guide and finished climbing the peak.

The second day of the parikrama, which Pallu and I had missed, had been

beautiful and emotional. The others avoided discussing it when we were around, which was thoughtful of them. Gradually, we learnt about that day – the thrill of completing the parikrama, sights on the way, the people they encountered. At the place where the deceased are remembered, Jeff made a small shrine for his dead cat. At the tunnel of rebirth, if you are able to crawl through the tiny passage, it is said that you will be born to your current set of parents in your next life. Jeff had crawled out and said, 'Sorry Mum and Dad, you're stuck with me again!' At the top of the Dolma La pass, Sperello tied the black flags his sister had given him. Katy and Ying stood on the peak together, savouring the moment.

Prarthana went ahead on a pony. Once Pallu and I had started making our way back down, she had felt alone. I imagine her holding tightly on to the reins, anxious as the pony pointed its nose up to the great heights of Dolma La pass. Out of the three Indian ladies, Prarthana had been the most afraid, but she's the one who had made it. I am glad that at least one of us made it till the end.

Sperello takes something shiny out from his pocket. There are two chocolates, wrapped in gold-coloured paper. He had brought seven from Italy, one for each of us as a treat for finishing the parikrama. Everyone else had had theirs at the end of their parikrama.

'These are yours,' he tells us, and with his usual courtesy, he hands them to Pallu and me. I feel a slight catch in my throat as I begin to explain the obvious – Pallu and I have not finished the parikrama. But I stop myself. Pallu thanks him and unwraps her chocolate. I do the same. The sweetness of the chocolate explodes in my mouth. Perhaps the point of the chocolate is to celebrate endings of all kinds, no matter how they have been reached.

With everyone back, the campsite is lively. Jeff sits on a folding chair, kicking his bare feet in the cold backwaters of the lake. The German couple is setting up camp with their helpers. Katy, Pallu, and I sip hot tea, while Sperello buys salt from the old woman manning the campsite, the gift he had been seeking for his friend in Italy. He gives Pallu and me light pink lumps of rock salt as keepsakes.

As I chat with the rest of the group, I find it hard to believe that I was so close to death just a few hours ago. Despite my fading vision, I had wanted to go up to Dolma La pass, where the air was even thinner, and where death would have hovered even closer. Chhiring saved my life by rushing me back down the

mountain. I owe my life to Nyima, who accompanied me, to the pony who carried me, to the horsewoman who guided the animal, and to Pallu, who refused to leave my side. In the end, at the mountain of the gods, I'd been saved by the people around me.

Moon Lake

Lake Manasarovar, Tibet
Altitude ~ 4,600 metres

THE SUNSET ON LAKE Manasarovar tears the sky apart in rose and orange and red. The lake is aglow and appears surreal. Ying, with her gift of beautiful words, tells us this moment contains both the transient and the eternal. *Transient and eternal*. I repeat those words to myself. The moment is transient because everything is transient. It is eternal because the sunset is wondrous and beautiful and joyful, and those qualities come as close to the eternal as we can reach in the brief span of our existence.

A full moon hovers in the sky. Purnima, a full moon day like this one, is auspicious for a parikrama around Lake Manasarovar. Sperello has arranged for a Land Cruiser for this 85-kilometre journey. Pallu, Prarthana, and I climb in the back. Sperello gets in the front. As the vehicle starts, he turns and says to Pallu and me, 'I am glad you can do this parikrama. I am glad you will be able to complete this one.'

The parikrama around the lake, though less favoured than the one around Kailash, is also holy, especially during Purnima, when the moon reflects in the waters. If the parikrama around Mount Kailash is an act of deference to the God of Destruction, what is the meaning of the parikrama around the lake on the night of the full moon?

Buddhists revere the moon. Dogen compared the reflection of the moon on

water to a person being enlightened. When the moon reflects on water, the moon does not get wet, the water is not pierced, nor is anything reshaped; so it is when a person attains enlightenment. And though the light of the moon is vast and great, it can be reflected in a dew drop on a blade of grass or in a single raindrop; so it is with the vast light of enlightenment.

In a Zen story, a nun named Chiyono had practised meditation for years but had not attained enlightenment. One night, she filled water from a well into her old bucket. The bottom of the bucket had been bound with bamboo. That night, the moon was bright, and she saw it reflected in the water of the bucket. Suddenly, the bottom of the pail broke, and the water fell to the earth. At that moment, Chiyono realised the truth: no water, no moon.

Japanese stories and riddles are famously mysterious. They are intended to be. Perhaps because enlightenment is elusive, if not impossible to understand. Perhaps the only way to truly understand enlightenment is to attain it. Yet, even without an exact understanding, I love these mysterious stories with their exquisite images: a moon reflected in a bucket of water; the sky, vast and infinite, reflected in a single drop of rain.

In the Tibetan tradition too, the moon is revered. The Saga Dawa festival is the holiest of festivals in Tibetan Buddhism and culminates on the full moon day of the month. The moon appears in many Tibetan thankas that are hung outside temples. Like the one we saw in Yalbang monastery, thankas are drawn with Mara surrounding a wheel in which scenes from the life and teachings of the Buddha are depicted. At the top, Buddha floats in clouds. His hand is outstretched and his index finger points to the moon, painted in the sky above Mara. The glowing moon is a gentle silver light, and it is the symbol of all the teachings of the Buddha. It is the dhamma, and the path to enlightenment. When the Buddha points to the moon, he points to the way to end suffering in this world.

I am free to take whatever meaning I wish to from this moon lake. Since Manasarovar had sprung from the consciousness of Brahma, I like to think of this lake as a symbol of creative consciousness. Our parikrama around this lake, on this night of the full moon, is an act of deference to creativity. Perhaps that is what I had been seeking all along, to create something new and beautiful, which emerges from my consciousness into the world.

The night air is frigid. I burrow into my coat. As our car circles the lake, small rabbits scurry away and then turn to watch us, their eyes glittering in the car lights. Sperello takes a photograph as we slow down. When we speed up again, I ask him to e-mail them to me.

'I wish I had gotten a better camera. I wish I had taken more photos,' I tell Sperello. Pallu and I have hardly taken any photos. My camera is better suited to snapping birthday parties than sweeping vistas and giant mountains.

'You can have moments or mementos. You can't have both,' he points out.

Our car bumps along the moonlit path. Local pilgrims, thickly swaddled, walk with bags and cooking vessels and other belongings bundled and slung over their shoulders. On a hill to our left is a small monastery, shadowy in the darkness. I can see its windows in a row, and snippets of reds and greens and yellows. Wet pebbles near the lake glow like pearls in the moonlight. The night makes everything mysterious and ethereal, and the moon's glow seems more luminous than the sun's dazzle. Without light pollution, the stars are brilliant. With the sky so close, I feel I need only stretch far enough to pluck out the brightest stars and take them home for my children.

Returning

Hyderabad, India
Altitude ~ 500 metres

AT HOME, EVERYTHING HAS stayed the same. Hari sips his fresh filter coffee from the same white cup. The children chatter away about the same friends, the same teachers, the same TV show they are still crazy about. In the garden, the pink oleander and the red hibiscus are still in bloom. Yet, all that is old and familiar seems new and wonderful, as if I am in someone else's dream.

I show Hari the beer-cap trick I had learned from Jeff. He shakes his head with due appreciation. I demonstrate the backpack-flip trick, and the children are impressed. They practise doing it with their schoolbags.

In the evening, Hari and I have a moment alone. I catch him peering into my face.

'What?' I ask.

He shakes his head. But I think I understand. Years before, Hari had gone on a trek with his friends to the mountains of Colorado. When he came back, he had stories of sleeping in tents, eating canned food and mixed nuts, climbing rocks, and clambering out of gorges. As he spoke, I could not stop staring at him. All of this was entirely unlike my husband. He is particular about his food habits, he likes to sleep only on his side of the bed and only on his pillow, and I have never seen him clambering over anything, ever. While Hari is a careful dresser and always well groomed, the man before me was unbathed, his jeans were dirty, and his shoes were

trailing mud. He had a beard. I could not remember the last time I had seen him with facial hair. How deeply had the experience altered him? How much had he changed?

That is how Hari looks at me now. How much have I changed? I have been to places he has heard of only in myths. I have almost died. He has not been a part of these events in my life. Does that mean I will have something apart from him and from our life together?

Perhaps. I don't know if Hari will ever fully understand my journey, because he was not there. But what I do know is that in those mountains, among the bare lives of the mountain people, and on the slopes of Kailash as I rode the horse to safety, I wanted to go home. I wanted my family.

'Hari,' I say, 'tell me about the dream.'

'I already told you.'

'No, the details.'

'What details?'

'Where were we? At home? In some other place? In America, in India?'

Hari thinks for a second, then shrugs. 'I don't know.'

'What colour were the walls?'

'Kavi, I don't remember,' he says.

'OK. How did I look?'

'You remember the picture in my office? You looked like that.' It was a picture he had taken of me when we were in our twenties. We had just been engaged. We had been walking down a street when he saw a photo studio. Shy about being photographed, I was reluctant. But he had insisted because he was going back to his hometown and wanted my photo. In it, my dress is black and gold and my straight hair cups my face.

'OK. So I looked the way I was in that picture.' I am delighted to receive some concrete details. 'How did you look?'

'I don't know. I must have looked the way I look now. I don't know. In my dream, I can't see myself, right?' Hari says.

In my imagination, I recreate my husband's dream. In my version, we are in a room and it is suffused with an early-evening light. We are sitting on the bench and facing a wall that is painted a drab grey-green. Before us is a small window. There

are no mountains. There are no rocks or anything hard or bare. The world outside is tall trees and unknown green plants bursting from soft, moist earth. Hari's hair is salt and pepper; mine is straight and black, grazing the shoulders of my dress. We do not say anything. We sit silently with our arms linked as we look out the window.

For the next few days, Pallu's family keeps her close. She stays cocooned in her old life. By being away, she has drawn closer to Ashok and her children. Pallu places the mala in the prayer room in their house. Ashok, like Hari, is religious. To him, the Rudraksha mala is a blessing of immeasurable value. Pallu sees it both as a gift from the lake she had dreamed of seeing as a girl, and proof that she completed something even greater than she had set out to do.

We send the Manasarovar water we have collected in plastic bottles to our relatives and friends. They sprinkle it into a bucket and bathe in it. Old ladies touch us to share in the punyam, the merit, we have acquired through our journey. Some of them pour the water in their palms and drink it as an offering.

I do not tell Hari about the blue lights. They no longer seem as consequential as they had on that day in Kailash. I don't think of the lights as signs of Shiva or as a hallucination of Buddha Vairochana. I believe they were a symptom of altitude sickness.

Yet I cannot forget what I felt as I saw those blue lights dancing towards me on that cold and brilliant morning in the icy slopes of Kailash.

Transient and Eternal

YING'S WORDS SIT WITH me. Transient and eternal. According to the Buddha, nothing of this world is eternal, and everything of this world is transient. Our journey is over, and the beauty of the lake and the mountain is already distant. Yet, the things that stay with us will be as eternal as anything in this life can be. Pallu always will have the Rudraksha mala. We always will have the rocks Jeff gave us. We always will have photos and e-mails from our fellow travellers. We always will remember the friendships we have made. And some memories will stay with us even as others fade away.

When I think about our journey, I recall specific moments and experience them just as vividly as I had in that exact instant. I remember the steam rising from the dumplings we had for lunch in the alpine forest in Humla. I remember exactly how, from the first campsite, Kailash appeared towering against the horizon in black stone and white snow. I remember the sound of horse hooves on rocks.

What I remember most vividly is the stolen day with Pallu at Lake Manasarovar.

Pallu and I, in our thick coats and hiking boots, are lying on our backs on the shore. The sun warms our faces, the cold breeze nips at our cheeks, and the dust sand musses our hair. Scattered birds glide gently on the bluest water. The silence and isolation feel like luxury, like cool silk sheets against skin.

There is a small cairn nearby. I pick up a stone to add to it. Just as with all the other stones I have added to all the other cairns, I want this one to mean something. I look over at my cousin, who has stretched out her long legs and closed her eyes

against the sun. This cairn at the lake stands for all the things that Pallu and I do not speak of – generosity, acceptance, and what it means to forgo a dream for the sake of friendship. Hunching over, I add another pebble to the wobbly pile.

Afterword and Acknowledgements

I STARTED MY JOURNEY to Kailash and Manasarovar without any idea of chronicling it. I kept no notes, carried a basic camera, and took few photographs. Fortunately, Sperello, Ching, Jeff, and Katy took plenty of photographs and kept detailed journals, all of which greatly aided my memory a year later, when I began to write about the journey. The photographs in the book have been taken by them and I am deeply grateful that they have allowed me to use their work. My conversations with Pallu and Prarthana also helped flesh out many details. For that, and for so many other things, I am eternally grateful to my wonderful travel companions.

I owe a large debt of gratitude to our guide Chhiring, and to Ming Ma and Surendra. I am especially grateful to Chhiring and his crew for safely guiding us. Unfortunately, in order to keep the focus on Kailash and Manasarovar, I did not chronicle some of the other amazing places they showed us – the ancient cave kingdom of Guge, the drive to the Tibetan side of Mount Everest, and the stop at the enormous sand hills at the banks of the Brahmaputra river. One day, perhaps, I will write about them and they will be part of another story. Also, for narrative flow, the timings of conversations were, in some cases, shifted. Finally, the words written are not exactly the ones spoken, yet they are true to the meaning of the remembered conversation. I am grateful, again, to my fellow travellers for reading my final draft and helping me hone it for accuracy of timings, events, and conversations – in this I am especially indebted to Pallu for reading every one of the many, many drafts of the book with patience and love.

Without my husband's support, I would not have had the courage to complete this book. I am deeply grateful to him – he knew I was a writer long before I did. I owe a great debt of gratitude to my publisher Krishan Chopra at HarperCollins India for believing in my work and for his guidance. I would also like to thank Siddhesh Inamdar and the team at HarperCollins India. I am very grateful to May-Lan Tan for her generosity of spirit and her invaluable help and to Shelley Kenigsberg for her guidance and editing. I am very grateful to Deb Mukharji, Dr Sita Reddy, Manasa Reddy, Sandhya Luther, Maliny Menon, and Swathi Kantamani for their support, comments and encouragement. I owe many thanks to Matthew Seigal, my teacher, who helped me realise that I had a voice worth listening to. It was in his class that I first began to write about this journey.

Finally, I am most grateful to the people of Humla and Tibet – it is their land we travelled in and it is their spirit that left me humbled and that filled this journey with beauty and meaning and wonder.

About the Author

KAVITHA YAGA BUGGANA lives in Hyderabad. Her essays and short fiction have been published in literary magazines in India and abroad. She is currently working on a collection of short stories. In her previous avatars, she was a software engineer in Chicago and a developmental economist.